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ABSTRACT

Articles in this publication address the writing process, teaching writing, and research on the teaching of writing, and take the form of personal experience or opinion, or explore the work of others who have contributed to the field. Articles in the first issue of the volume include: "Imaginary Gardens and Real Issues: Improving Language Arts in the Urban Elementary School" (Joe Check); "Do Workshops Work?" (Kathleen O'Shaughnessey); "Taking out the Furniture, or What's Obvious: Lessons from the Literature Institute for Teachers" (Marjorie Roemer); "See You Next Year: The Writing Process in the Looping Classroom" (Alisa Daniel); "Behind Their Backs: Proximity and Insult in Student Response" (Roger Green); and "Note-Taking and Note-Making in Freshman Composition" (Mark Farrington). Articles in the second issue include: "On Coaching the Writer" (Jon Appleby); "Teaching in Two Worlds: Critical Reflection and Teacher Change in the Writing Center" (Dale Jacobs); "A Cure for Writer's Block: Writing for Real Audiences" (Anne Rodier); "Lessons in Literacy: What a Five-Year-Old Taught Her Teacher-Mom" (Eve Newsome); "The Writer's Eye: Using the Writer's Notebook as a Lens To View the World" (Scott Peterson); and "How Did You Do That? The Secrets of Strong Writers" (Dean Smith). Articles in the third issue include: "The Other Side of the Stone: Student Conversations with a Graveyard" (Patrick C. Pritchard); "Student Slayer: The Imposed Curriculum" (Kevin Lavey); "From a High-Tech to a Low-Tech Writing Classroom: You Can't Go Home Again" (Charles Moran); "My Laptop Ambivalence: Some Speed Bumps on the High-Tech Road to Writing" (Susan Cvengros Mortensen); "Staging Learning: The Play's the Thing" (Jean Hicks and Tim Johnson); and "Kyle's Surprises: Anecdote as a Strategy to Strengthen Student Writing" (Edward Darling). Articles in the fourth issue include: "Collaborative Dialogue: When Writing Becomes a Social Act" (Mary T. Mackley and Carole Jonaitis); "Struggling To Compose: How Children Regard Themselves as Writers" (Anne Alpert); "When a Student Hands Me a Line Like This" (Georgia Tiffany); "Teachers at the Center: A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Writing Project" (James Gray); "Bicultural Literacy: A Personal Exploration" (Marcia Venegas-Garcia);

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"Accidental Poetry: A Literacy Autobiography" (Carol Case); and "Reflective Friday: Time Out To Think" (Kim Douillard). (RS)

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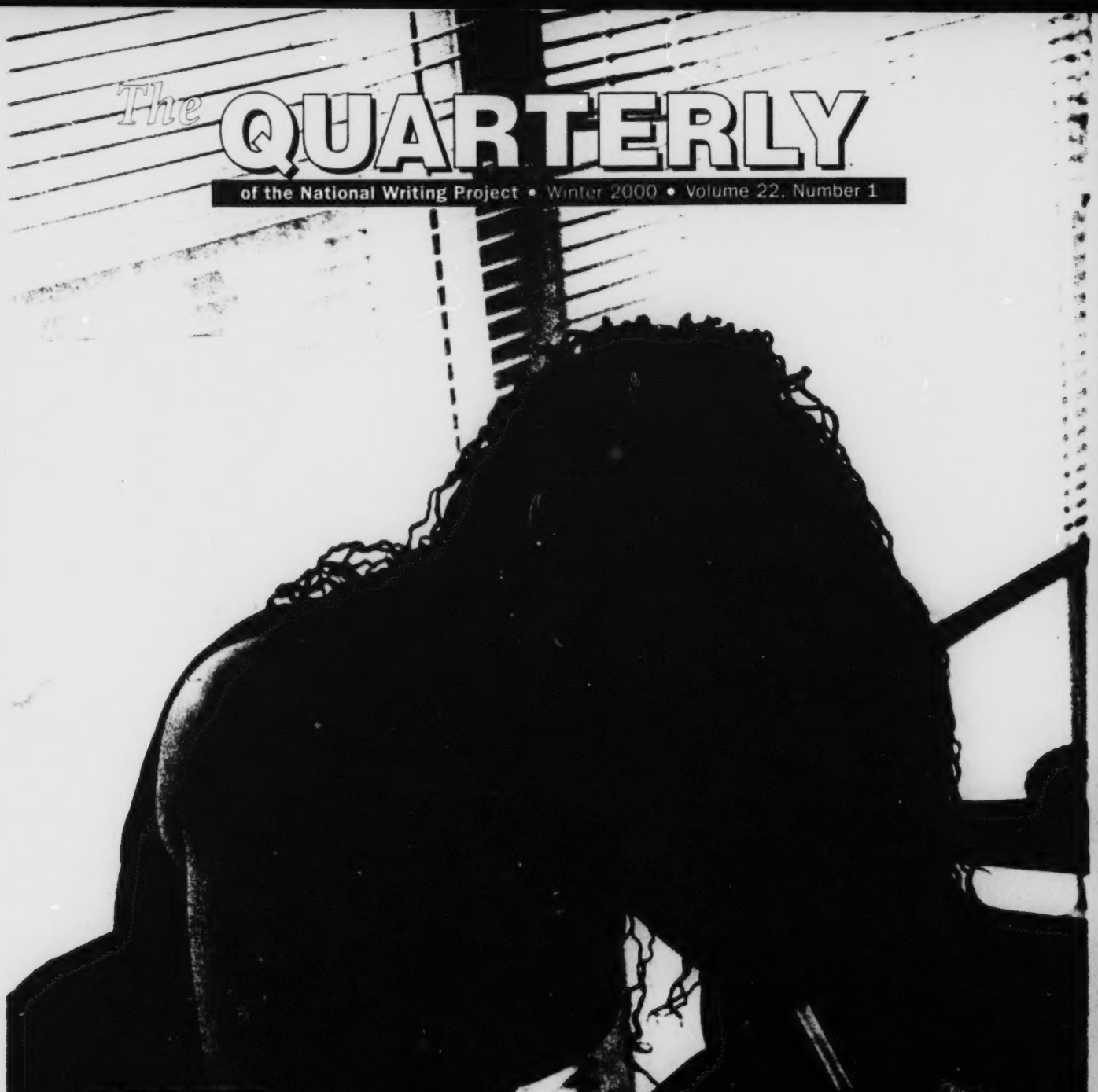

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Imaginary Gardens and Real Issues:

Improving Language Arts in the Urban Elementary School

Joe Check

As America enters the twenty-first century, elementary schools across the country are striving for reform. Improvement of reading and writing skills is central to reform everywhere, but in urban schools it takes on special urgency. Large numbers of English Language Learners and the widely publicized "achievement gap" in reading scores between white students and students of color create intense pressure on principals and teachers to achieve measurable gains quickly.

Many National Writing Project (NWP) sites are well positioned to help such schools. A growing number of sites are conducting or exploring professional development formats that build on the traditional workshop series to create deeper relationships, helping schools address questions of reading, writing, and thinking through inquiry groups, teacher research, documentation of student work, and other techniques. Locally, such initiatives hold great potential for expanding partnerships between NWP sites and schools. Nationally, increased federal support for NWP—for example, the inclusion of NWP under the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Act (CSRD)—brings with it federal expectations that we will play a role in school-wide reform.

In addition, as the documented success of Writing Projects increasingly enters the research literature, schools and school systems engaged in reform turn to local sites with broader requests for assistance. Milbrey McLaughlin (1990) has pointed out, for example, that "if teachers lie at the heart of successful efforts to enhance classroom practices, then the professional networks that engage teachers comprise promising vehicles for change. The apparent success of teacher groups such as the Bay Area Writing Project... suggest that change strategies rooted in the natural networks of teachers—in their professional associations—may be more effective than strategies that adhere solely to a delivery structure outlined by the policy system" (p.15).

Heightened federal and local expectations can present site leaders with a dilemma: how does a practitioner-centered, writing-focused professional development network whose credo is "teachers-teaching-teachers" play a role in reforms which often implicitly or explicitly deny teachers' autonomy and efficacy?

My interest in these issues is longstanding. As director of a doctoral program in Urban School Leadership, my students are teacher leaders, principals, and system-wide administrators in more than twenty urban communities in Eastern Massachusetts. As Director of the Boston Writing Project and a member of the leadership team of NWP's Urban Sites Network, I work with teacher consultants locally and from across the country who are practicing and promoting urban literacy reform.

In both of these roles, I have recently begun to glimpse a recurrent pattern in urban reform. Large amounts of time, effort, and money are poured into a troubled school in a short period of time, with the expectation that both "defective" teachers and long-standing problems of school achievement will be permanently "fixed." The money is tied to specific reform programs which the school must adopt. In some cases these are publisher-sponsored workshops or for-profit educational innovations, in others they are "exemplary programs" sanctioned by national initiatives like the Annenberg Challenge (now active in New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and other metropolitan areas) or the CSRD (active in urban districts in all fifty states).

Reform typically starts with an initial flurry of activity and funding lasting eighteen months to two years, then this initial momentum slows noticeably. Multiple causes contribute to this slowing: a supportive principal or key teacher leader leaves to take another assignment and is replaced by someone less charismatic; burnout begins to set in among the most active staff members; grant funding which supported release time and new materials is withdrawn by the central office to be re-allocated to the latest high-priority "school in trouble." Under these conditions reform proves difficult to sustain, and in the end the school sees little long-term change in either teaching practice or student performance.

If this pattern is as common as my experience suggests, it raises serious questions. If urban schools are to be permanently improved, we need to begin by honestly analyzing both the forces driving reform and the school-based contexts which make it so difficult to achieve. Only when we have gained a basic understanding of these "facts of life" will we as writing projects be able to contextualize our professional development efforts, not just in terms of changes in the teaching of writing, but in the larger context of whole-school change. In this article I try to take a first step in this direction.

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I offer three connected approaches to permanently improving literacy education in urban elementary schools: first, a portrait of an imaginary, composite urban school—East Elementary—that illustrates some of the reasons why lasting change is so difficult to achieve; second, consideration of some relevant research findings concerning reform and language arts instruction; third, suggestions for a new way to think about change. My purpose in this three-pronged focus is to highlight implementation issues that occur in schools when outsiders—reform experts, university faculty, content-area "coaches" — attempt to work closely with insiders—teachers and principals—to create lasting change. If such collaborations are ever to succeed, I believe we must shift the focus of effort from *exemplary programs* created by outside agents and supported by short-term funding, to the creation of *exemplary contexts*, the set of conditions that will allow a particular school with a unique history and faculty to integrate outside interventions into a process of sustainable success on its own terms.

I. An Imaginary School with Real Issues: East Elementary

The poet Marianne Moore (1951) once referred to her creations as "Imaginary gardens filled with real toads." Her poems were products of the imagination, but the issues about life they raised were real. The poetic form allowed her to talk about these difficult realities in unique and effective ways.

Taking a cue from Moore, I've tried to create "an imaginary school filled with real issues." Drawing on published research, interviews, and my own experience, I've described a composite urban school—East Elementary — staffed with a principal and teachers who are both individuals and representative of larger realities. I'll ask you to join me on my initial visits to East, seeing the school through my outsider's eyes; then to sit in on conversations with school insiders while I think through ways to help East move forward and recommend first steps in the change process.

East's Profile, Principal Alice and Teacher-Leader Barbara

East is a historically low-performing school and its relationship with parents has never been strong. It has 800 students and, using the federal government's categories, reports 50% as African-American, 25% as Hispanic, 10% as Asian, 10% as white, and 5% as "other minority." About 25% of East's students, disproportionately African-American and Hispanic boys, are in special education classes at least part of the day. There is a substantial Spanish bilingual cluster. East is a Title One school; 35% of its students read below grade level and 60% are eligible for the federal free lunch program. The average age of East teachers is in the late 40s; most have been teaching for 15 years or more. The teaching staff is predominantly white and female.

East's teachers are working hard to move forward together under the leadership of Alice, a committed and active African-American principal who came to the school one year ago. Alice is under tremendous pressure from above to implement new curriculum standards and improve student performance on statewide tests keyed to those standards. She also feels tremendous internal pressure to succeed based on three

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factors: she has been a high achiever her entire life and is determined to meet the professional challenge of "turning East around"; she is among the first generation of women and "minority" administrators in the school system, and is aware that many eyes are on her; and she feels a special responsibility to the "minority" parents and children who make up the majority of the school's population.

Alice has spent her first year developing with her staff a mandated school-wide change plan which is now on file with the central office and for which she and the school will be held accountable. To improve language arts instruction, this plan relies heavily on adoption of an "exemplary literacy program" that is paid for by federal CSRD funds. The program's philosophy holds that the school must develop "ownership" of the program for it to be successful.

As part of the process of taking ownership, Alice has asked a "coach" from the university, myself, to help East identify change issues raised by adoption of an "exemplary" program in the context of the state's new language arts curriculum standards and high-stakes tests. In what follows I present a picture of the setting for change at East just prior to the initiation of the program, as seen through my outsider's eyes.

****

On my first visit to East, Alice suggests that I talk with Barbara, a third-grade teacher who is successful with students and widely respected by other teachers in the building. Though she holds no leadership title other than membership on the school council, Barbara is one of three or four influential teacher-leaders in the building whose support is absolutely essential if the change process is to have a hope of succeeding.

In a long conversation with Barbara, a picture of teaching at East starts to emerge. Self-contained, regular education teachers, the majority in the school, have widely different philosophies and teaching styles. There are animosities between some individuals, but in general there is a "live and let live" attitude about teaching as long as colleagues feel that you are working hard and care about the children entrusted to you.

The most "progressive" teachers share a holistic approach characterized by anti-basal, anti-skill and drill, anti-prescriptive instruction that tries to address all four language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—in a developmental manner that looks at the whole child. They value classroom activities that meet multiple curricular goals, and do not seek a strict one-to-one correlation between a single activity and a single outcome in reading or writing. They are deeply troubled by those who interpret the new curriculum as connecting a single classroom activity to a single curricular goal, an approach they see as pedagogically regressive.

A number of other teachers in the building have tried such a "progressive" approach and abandoned it for a much more traditional one, one which is also favored by a vocal set of East parents. I recall Alice's words at our first meeting: "Take the whole language approach to reading. Many teachers here say they tried it but are now saying it doesn't work for urban low income kids because they believe our children nee a more direct and structured approach to reading, therefore they are going back to a heavy phonics approach. But the best teachers found that they have to use a balance of a whole language and structured phonetic approach."

A small number of teachers are clearly unsuccessful. Their classes have frequent discipline problems, their students make little progress, and savvy parents visit Alice early in the year to insure that their children do not get assigned to these teachers.

The Wave Theory

The following week I spend a good deal of time sitting in regular education classrooms to which I have been invited, watching East's teachers at work and talking with them about why they do what they do. At the end of the week I meet with Alice and Barbara to offer first impressions.

We are sitting in the tiny principal's office on a Friday afternoon. The school has just gone from the noise and activity of dismissal to the quiet that follows, and Alice and Barbara have just come in from bus duty. Luckily, today no buses were late, no children got sick, and no neighbors have called to complain about noisy East students running through yards on the way home.

I struggle with what to say. I'm finding it very difficult to generalize about teaching at East, especially based on only a single week of observation. I decide to start with a comparison. The regular education

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teachers here, I say, are like beach-combing artists, constructing individual, eclectic pedagogies by combining insights from years of classroom experience with treasures left on shore by successive waves of pedagogical innovation.

Alice and Barbara look at me like I'm crazy; it's an uncomfortable moment. Clearly I need to explain myself. Aware that I'm beginning to sound like someone who works in a university, I go on. I explain my "wave theory" of language arts teaching. Most East teachers are old enough to have seen at least three distinct waves of "new pedagogy" in reading and writing break over schools and recede. The first wave, writing process/writing workshop pedagogy, began in the late 1970's and crested in the mid- 80's; the second wave, whole language, began gathering force as writing process receded, and the third wave, multicultural children's literature, began to really take off in the mid-1990s. None of the three "waves" completely receded, and all are being advocated and practiced simultaneously today. But staff development programs in school systems tended to adopt them in succession as each became the "hot" pedagogical innovation, so teachers were likely to experience them sequentially.

As an outside observer, it seems to me that most East teachers have constructed their own synthesis of techniques from these three waves, combined with their undergraduate or graduate training in the teaching of reading. Now they must comply with curriculum mandates, struggling to craft a pedagogy that is true to their beliefs and also meets the new demands of standards and testing.

Interested but skeptical, Alice asks me a question which is also a challenge: "How will understanding 'the waves' help East move forward?" I take this to mean: "I need to turn this school around in a hurry and I'm in a vulnerable position. If what you're explaining can help improve things here for teachers and kids in measurable ways, I'm still interested, if it won't, I can't afford to spend time on it."

Deeper into The Waves

Accepting the challenge, I jump in, explaining that writing process pedagogy challenged, for the first time, the primacy of reading as the focus of staff development, curriculum time and textbooks. But over time teachers learned experientially what researchers have confirmed: in many cases there is little difference between the classroom practice of teachers who label themselves "writing process" teachers and teachers who do not. Many teachers who got the training to make this pedagogy work in their classrooms experienced a remarkable transformation for themselves and their students. For others, change consisted of replacing the 70's jargon "brainstorming" with the 80's jargon "prewriting" and replacing a publisher's wall poster listing "The Elements of the Five Paragraph Theme" with a similar poster listing "The Five Steps of the Writing Process."

The second wave, whole language, enfolded writing in an inclusive approach to language arts, reclaiming for the reading community some of the ground it had lost to advocates of writing process. But as Alice and Barbara know, political pressure has made East's school system step away from officially embracing whole language, though many teachers in the building use elements of whole language pedagogy.

Many teachers who got the training to make (writing process) pedagogy work in their classrooms experienced a remarkable transformation for themselves and their students. For others, change consisted of replacing the 70's jargon "brainstorming" with the 80's jargon "prewriting" and replacing a publisher's wall poster listing "The Elements of the Five Paragraph Theme" with a similar poster listing "The Five Steps of the Writing Process."

The third wave was children's literature. The recent emphasis on quality children's literature, particularly multicultural children's literature, is warmly embraced by the majority of East teachers. Many are spending their own money to equip classroom literature libraries while their school system continues to spend millions of dollars on a new series of basal readers.

The new basal has further confused pedagogical issues. The school system ordered basals by grade level, but so many of East's students are reading below grade level that the basal is useless for achieving the principal benefit for which it was

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adopted—providing a unifying element to the curriculum in a school system with a high level of student mobility. And just as the basal series of the 1980's adopted the nomenclature and trappings, but not the spirit, of writing process pedagogy, the basals of the 90's have adopted superficial elements of whole language and whole literature while missing their essence, and have added a renewed emphasis on phonics.

Barbara responds that most East teachers have chosen a middle way, using some basal stories but supplementing them with whole works of children's literature. Many wonder if what they are doing is "right," she adds, and feel uncertain about the decisions they have made. "But," says Alice, "you still haven't answered my question: what's the connection between the waves, improved language arts instruction, and whole-school change?"

My wave analysis may be of interest to the "regular education" teachers at East, but if the school is to change, the concerns of teachers outside the "mainstream" must be part of the mix. Alice and Barbara suggest I spend the next week getting the perspectives of Jackie, a Special Needs teacher, Francisco, a bilingual education teacher, and Phyllis, a Title One specialist. At the end of the week, this is what I have found out.

Jackie

Jackie is struggling with the redefined professional role that special needs inclusion demands of her. For years she has used a prescriptive approach to language development based on the need to construct discrete objectives in her students' Individual Educational Plans (IEP's), with each instructional activity tied to a measurable outcome. Now she is being called on to recreate herself in the more flexible role called for in the inclusion classroom, in which she is a second teacher paired for part of the day with various regular education teachers with whom she shares her "mainstreamed" SPED students. She still feels uncomfortable entering some of her colleagues' classrooms, and they are uncomfortable having her there. The training in Special Education she received 15 to 20 years ago and her years of experience writing, implementing, and monitoring IEP's are based on philosophies of learning substantially different from those held by Barbara and other teachers she must now team with. Jackie has, on her own, sought out workshops and classes in new, holistic pedagogies, but she is still facing a complex professional transition. Now she must work each week with five or more mainstream teachers whose styles are widely divergent from each other. Further, East students have done poorly on the recent state reading tests. Because the scores of Special Needs students are not figured into the school's testing average, she now feels pressure to help raise the school's average by classifying poorly performing students as special needs cases, even though she can identify no serious learning or emotional disability. Because this pressure runs directly counter to the philosophy of inclusion which the school has publicly adopted, Jackie feels doubly uneasy.

A school-wide approach to language arts would ease Jackie's transition by providing common ground for the collaborative planning she does with mainstream teachers. But if the proposed school-wide language arts initiative is to be successful, she and her mainstream colleagues need a chance to discuss not just what they do, but *why* they do it. Because of the sensitive nature of this discussion, it must take place in a trustful setting, one which assumes that good teaching can look many different ways, that because one person does things differently from another does not mean that one is right and the other is wrong.

Francisco

Francisco teaches in the school's Spanish bilingual cluster. For him the single biggest issue around language is equity. He struggles daily not to be marginalized as a professional, and not to have his students and his program marginalized within the life of the school because their first language is not English. Pedagogically, his graduate level training has given him a sophisticated set of tools to analyze students' proficiency in both their native language (L1) and their acquired language (L2). Other teachers in the building seem to care about only one thing, "Are you teaching them English?" Yet Francisco knows that one key to building English proficiency in his students is to strengthen their Spanish, because research on language learning has shown that strengthening native language skills results in improved English skills (Cummins, 1996, 1981; Beykont, 1994; Ramirez, 1992). He also knows that older children must maintain their cognitive development in areas such as math, science, and social studies if they are not to fall behind, and therefore must receive some content-area instruction in L1. Outside his own cluster, no one in the school is familiar with this way of looking at language, and so it is difficult for him to talk about language

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development with colleagues. He knows from the way other teachers react that he is using a vocabulary and developmental framework with which they are not familiar.

Further, Francisco has studied persuasive evidence that it takes six or more years of support for students to make a successful transition to a level of English that will allow them to succeed academically in the mainstream classroom, but because of laws governing bilingual education he is under tremendous pressure to push students into the mainstream in three years or less (Ramirez, 1992; Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1981). In these circumstances, he knows that some are bound to fail. If he attempts to do what his professional training dictates—hold on to his students for more than three years—the rest of the school sees him as "coddling" or "sheltering" them; if he pushes them into the mainstream, he knows he is setting them up for a failure which will confirm, to other staff members, negative stereotypes of Hispanic students as academically inadequate. Not only does Francisco bring a different developmental framework to the language arts discussion, he also brings powerful political issues around language status. These issues directly affect him and his students, but if he expresses them openly, he may be branded a "troublemaker" and find that he, his bilingual colleagues, and his program become even more marginalized. Francisco is angry, but he dare not express his anger.

Phyllis

When Phyllis started as a Title One reading teacher years ago, regulations confined her to one-on-one or small group reading instruction in a closely defined, diagnostic/prescriptive framework. Over the years Title One regulations have become more holistic, recognizing that reading and writing are developmentally intertwined, and she has taken graduate courses and workshops in the teaching of writing as well as in whole language and children's literature. Though she still sees students individually or in small groups, her teaching philosophy is close to Barbara's. This is her first year at East, and she is still feeling her way along. She receives students from Barbara, Jackie, and Francisco, and she would like to synchronize her instruction with what goes on in their classrooms, but she really doesn't have a clear idea of what *does* go on, and she's never had a chance to talk to them about it. Already, though, she realizes that each one of them teaches with different assumptions. Right now, Phyllis relies heavily on her own accumulated, eclectic style that incorporates pieces of previous Title One philosophy and her graduate training, and concentrates her energy on her students while she feels out the other adults in the building.

II. Toads in the Garden: Cautionary Research and Analysis

At the end of the week, back in my office, I put my notes in order in preparation for Monday's meeting with Alice and Barbara. Then I put my university hat back on and begin to consider East in a national, research-based context. At this early stage, I see two large "danger zones" threatening instructional improvement at East. The first is a set of conditions described by systems thinker Michael Fullan (1996) as *fragmentation and overload*. According to Fullan:

> *There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that educational change is... non-linear. This means that the most systemically sophisticated plan imaginable will unfold in a non-linear, broken-front, back-and-forth manner. It will be fragmented.... Overload and fragmentation... take their toll on the most committed, who find that will alone is not sufficient to achieve or sustain reform.* (p. 422)

If Fullen is right, the quick fix of exemplary programs is unrealistic.

Diverse beliefs about how children learn to read and write represent an important element of fragmentation at East and schools like it, and as long as these beliefs remain unexamined, they are a major barrier to success, no matter what "exemplary program" is being put in place. For East to move forward, Barbara, Jackie, Francisco and Phyllis must begin to work together, rather than separately, for they serve the same group of children. But this will require time for the sharing of knowledge, activities for building mutual respect, and reflections which discover common ground in their divergent teaching philosophies and assumptions.

Another danger zone: at East both the motive force for change and the important ideas about how change is to be accomplished come from outside the school, indeed outside the teaching profession, implying that East and its teachers are part of the problem, not part of the solution. Yet for change to succeed, these very same

—continued on page 31

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Do Workshops Work?

BY KATHLEEN O'SHAUGHNESSY

Is finding one's own way the essence of teacher empowerment? Yes but it's complex, or so argues Kathleen O'Shaughnessy in this reflection on working with a group of "struggling but brave elementary teachers." As codirector of the NWP of Acadiana, a writing project site based in Lafayette, Louisiana, O'Shaughnessy came to work with these teachers as part of Project Outreach, a national network of eighteen writing project sites sponsored by DeWitt Wallace – Reader's Digest Fund. In Project Outreach, teacher leaders from member sites struggled bravely, too, confronting complex issues of equity, diversity, and access as they worked to better support and involve colleagues from low-income districts. Her account is dedicated to "all the wise and gifted teachers who manage to find their own ways in spite of it all."

—Elyse Eidman-Aadahl
Director, Project Outreach

The only good thing I can say about my sense of direction is that it's consistent. Ask me which way to turn or where something is, and I will always be wrong. That's why I don't go running when I'm away from home anymore. The last time I tried, I was in London. In the taxi from the airport, I'd noticed a lush green park near my hotel, so on my first morning after jet lag, I set out for a jog. But the park wasn't where I had left it. I went a little farther, tried a few different streets, and still no park. Then I realized I'd not only lost the park, but my hotel as well. I tried not to get panicky, or at least not to look panicky, but I was well and truly lost. I kept on the move, hoping at every corner to find one of those charming, unflappable bobbies you see in British sitcoms, but there were none. (Maybe they were all in the park.) My heartbeat was above its target zone for aerobic training but from fear rather than healthy exertion. Finally, I found a man opening his newsstand. When I asked him, breathlessly, if he might possibly know where my hotel was, he looked perplexed and pointed over my shoulder. I turned around and there, almost directly across the street from where we stood, was my hotel. I was very grateful, terribly embarrassed, and angry that I'd allowed my fear to cheat me out of the triumph of finding my own way.

I often relive this experience when I present workshops for teachers, but now I'm the kind stranger pointing the way and they're the frightened jogger, disconcerted by unfamiliar territory, afraid of making a wrong turn, embarrassed to ask for help but desperately grateful when it's offered, and unaware of the feeling of power and freedom that comes with finding one's own way. A teacher who can find her own way knows her territory — her students, her school culture, her understanding about how kids learn — as well as she knows the neighborhood she grew up in. And more importantly, she knows she knows it. Finding one's own way is the essence of teacher empowerment. It's the necessary prerequisite for becoming a reflective practitioner. It's what distinguishes the National Writing Project model from the dizzying parade of prepackaged, teacher-proof programs our school districts view as staff development, and it's the fundamental goal of every inservice session I conduct. But just how successful am I with those teachers who only connect with me in a limited number of sessions, who don't go on to participate in a summer institute, who comprise the majority of teachers I come in contact with?

My relationship with them is so much more complicated than it appears on the surface. I arrive at a workshop immersed in the *teachers teaching teachers* model, fascinated with the process of inquiry, and in love with teacher stories. With all that in my head, I often forget that my audience arrives with a completely different picture in theirs. For them, inservice training may mean a series of breakout sessions including one in which a sales rep from a textbook company shows them how to use their newly adopted basal series. Of course, anyone who can read can do this with no training at all since the teacher's every thought is scripted for her in the margins of the teacher's edition. Usually the speaker will also pull out all the shiny things — color transparencies, cassettes, videos — from the shiny box which the district probably didn't buy because all the money went for new workbooks. Or they may remember being herded, along with every other teacher and all the administrators, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and custodians from the district, into the coliseum that usually hosts rodeos and college basketball games to be magically transformed by a well-paid motivational speaker who manipulates his audience's

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emotions as smoothly as he manages his overhead projector — but never says one specific thing about how to teach anything any better. Caught between our conflicting paradigms, I struggle with my role. I want to do more than silently point the way but less than take teachers' hands and walk them all the way to their destinations. The teachers I meet have too many people holding their hands already. I don't want to be just another workshop leader with just another big fat handout of reproducible stuff to cram into an already overcrowded and disjointed teaching day. It worries me that they may go back to their classrooms and try to be me the way I tried to be Nanci Atwell after I read *In the Middle* for the first time. I learned then that cloning can never work as a staff development technique.

I teach eighth-grade language arts in Louisiana — the state whose legislature addressed the public's outcry about plummeting test scores and escalating school violence by passing a law requiring students in grades K-5 to say ma'am and sir to their teachers. I live and work in the heart of the Cajun part of the state, where we're known for our warmth, our food and our *joie de vivre*, but not for our academic achievements. Crawfish farmers and offshore oil field workers, many without high school diplomas, make lots more money than teachers, and their kids come to school knowing that. When a new teacher goes for a job interview, she is far more likely to be asked, "Who's your mama?" than "What professional literature have you read lately?" I love my state. I love the land, the culture, and the pace of life. But it is a struggle to be an educator where tourists are more treasured than teachers and state dollars dwindle to dimes before they reach our schools.

Of course, that struggle is not unique to Louisiana. Teaching is and always will be hard regardless of the circumstances. Questions about what to teach and how to teach it never seem to have once-and-for-all answers. The search for those answers is what drove me to mimic Nanci Atwell; it's what led me to the National Writing Project, and it's what I feel most competent to share with the teachers who attend my workshops. During my eight-year affiliation with the National Writing Project of Acadiana, I've presented more workshops than I can count, and in the past year or so I've been wrestling with a different struggle. This one is not so comfortable to talk about, but I suspect I'm not the only teacher consultant who feels it. It's the struggle not to become exactly what I say I despise — a one-way conveyor of tidy, simplistic answers to intensely complicated questions. When a room full of teachers is looking at me, seeing me as this year's expert, expecting me to show them the way, hoping this year it will finally be the right way, it's too easy to forget that I get lost sometimes too. Their paradigm is a seductive one when I'm the one on the other side of the overhead projector, but it never will empower teachers; it never will foster the development of teacher leaders. I knew that once but I almost forgot it until a group of struggling but brave elementary teachers in Church Point, Louisiana pointed me back in the right direction.

Our writing project site was one of eighteen from the national network to participate in Project Outreach, an effort funded by a grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. Its goals were to investigate the impact each writing project site has had on its educational

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community, to make writing project services more accessible to teachers and students in areas with high levels of poverty, to foster the development of teacher leaders, and to increase diversity among those leaders. The Project Outreach teams from each of the eighteen sites were free to develop whatever types of programs they felt would be the most effective for their particular circumstances.

One of the endeavors our Project Outreach team undertook was a yearlong staff development program at Church Point Elementary School. Church Point is a rural community of about 3,000 people, but the school district encompasses a large rural area surrounding the town, resulting in a large population (800 students in grades pre-kindergarten through five) for such a small town. Eighty-four percent of these students qualify for free or reduced lunch. In addition to the usual concern over low scores on standardized tests, the administrators at Church Point Elementary were also disturbed about some alarming statistics regarding their staff. Only 25% of the faculty lived in Church Point or the surrounding area; the rest drove in from larger towns or cities, many from Lafayette, nearly an hour's drive away. The pay in Church Point's district is fairly low compared to surrounding districts, so there is little incentive for teachers to maintain such a long commute. Consequently, Church Point Elementary routinely experiences a high turn over in staff. The year we began working with them, 18 of the 54 staff members were new teachers. With this discouraging fact in mind, the administration of the school struggled to find ways to keep teachers enthusiastic about their jobs and committed to the school.

I don't want to be just another workshop leader with just another big fat handout of reproducible stuff to cram into an already overcrowded and disjointed teaching day.

From its inception, we designed the Church Point project to be different from the traditional top-down model of staff development. First, no teachers were required to participate. Secondly, we advertised that each session would be interactive and hands-on; participants would not be sitting and taking notes but rather experiencing and experimenting with different classroom strategies. Finally, we asked the teachers who chose to participate to keep a journal throughout the project in which they discussed any new strategies they were trying, whether they viewed these as successes or failures, and any questions and concerns they had about their students' developing literacy. The school's curriculum coordinator, who was a member of the Project Outreach team, collected and read the journals once a month and summarized them for the rest of the team. The journals were intended to help the workshop leaders plan sessions based on the teachers' needs and to introduce the teachers to the practice of keeping a professional journal as a means of continuing their professional growth on their own after the sessions ended.

The very first entries convinced us of the power of these journals as a tool for us as workshop leaders. How effective could we have been if we had not known from the start of the almost crippling fears and self-doubts many of these teachers expressed so honestly in their journals?

> *The first meeting for the writing project was great. It established a realization of why writing is not used more often in my classroom. My fear of it. I am so afraid that my students won't leave my classroom with a knowledge of things like parts of speech, grammar rules, etc. I hope that through this workshop I will develop a confidence with writing myself so that I can pass this on to my students.*
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> *I fear writing enormously. It has always been a great punishment for me to write. I hope these workshops help me overcome my great fear of writing.*
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> *I must say that writing has been the hardest subject to incorporate into the curriculum. I just felt like it took so much time and energy to teach all my students how to write something interesting enough to read. First of all I am extremely intimidated with teaching writing. I am not an author and I've always felt that my writing was not an appropriate model to follow.*

How effective can any staff development program be if it doesn't take into account the experiences and attitudes of the

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participants? How often in the past have these or any teachers been asked what they know, what they want to know, or how they feel about the topic being presented to them? When these questions aren't asked, the unspoken message is that teachers' voices aren't important. Teachers with years of experience, who've taught hundreds of children at a particular grade level, are left believing that what they know isn't valuable, what they've observed and learned through trial and error doesn't count. They aren't the experts. The experts are the people who have left the classroom for higher paying, higher status positions and a teacher's job is to effectively implement whatever programs the experts are currently promoting.

We tried to address the teachers' doubts about their own writing and their students' writing abilities. We demonstrated lots of fluency-building activities that would allow the teachers and their students to experience success and gain confidence. We went on to present specific teaching strategies, management strategies, and research. The journals soon began to document learning on the part of the teachers as well as their students.

I have just completed a lesson on capit., punctuation, & paragraph format. The kids wrote about their most prized possession. More importantly, however, I modeled for them my own paragraph. I then changed some things & rewrote it for them. As I reviewed it with them, I changed even more of my 2nd draft. This was so very helpful to them to see me, their teacher, make mistakes & change things even after the 2nd time I wrote it.

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I tried "cubing" with the students this week. My objective was for the students to write a description using their senses. I held an apple in my hand and had students write descriptives for each sense (one at a time). I followed this by directing students to choose a writing format (poem, riddle, descriptive paragraph, how-to, narrative), use words from the sensory bank, and write. I was truly surprised with the results. I got things from "How to Make Applesauce" to precious alliteration poems. I will definitely use this strategy again.

As the project continued, the journals indicated that the teachers were making genuine efforts to incorporate activities from our workshops into their busy days. Uses of specific strategies and pieces of literature from the workshops were mentioned often. Though the teachers still relied heavily on their reading textbook series, they were willing to incorporate the new ideas and were often delighted with the results.

We had a "blast" this week writing. Students wrote their own "pourquoi" tale. We read the story "Why Frog and Snake Never Play Together" in reading this week. I read several other pourquois written by Rudyard Kipling to the class. Students then wrote their own tales. We had a contest to see who could be the most creative. They did such a great job! Gregory's entitled "How the Pig's Tale Got Curly" was so well done.

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After reading the story "Going Green" we worked on persuasive writing. The goal was to write a letter to the editor of a student newspaper to convince other children that they can do something to "save our planet." We did a prewriting activity as a class. We webbed the major problems—acid rain, air pollution, and land pollution—which were the 3 major sections of our story. We completed our web by listing possible solutions for these problems. Students then used this info. to write their letters. I reminded them that you have to back up persuasion with fact, not just saying (in essence) please, please, please, which many students tend to do. I believe this activity was quite a success.

As early as October, some entries began to read like the notes of teacher researchers. Even when they reported disappointment with their students' progress, they were forward-looking, questioning, and predicting.

This past week we've worked on narrative writing. We began with timelines as prewriting and then progressed through the writing process. Some students did well taking a piece all the way through. Some, however didn't do much to change their first rough draft. We'll have to work on this.

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This week students completed a writing survey. As I glanced over these, I noticed my students' attitudes toward

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writing are as varied as the students themselves. I'm looking forward to the end of the year (for more than obvious reasons!) to see if any attitudes will change on the post survey.

Other entries demonstrated the importance of providing teachers with opportunities to talk to each other for support and professional collaboration. Teachers often mentioned other teachers in the project as sources of ideas and inspiration.

I learned a neat editing tip from Shirley C. It's called the round table. Each student gets different colored pencils or crayons. We sit in a circle and the teacher tells the students, after exchanging papers, to take a red pencil and circle all misspelled words. Then we exchange again and take a blue marker and underline all run-on sentences, and so forth. Kids love it! Pretty effective for recognizing that a first draft isn't good enough.

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I must confess. I've been teaching isolated skills. This week we worked on abbreviations and using a, an, and the. I need a push to get back to writing. I'll have to go talk to Carolyn and Marlene to try to motivate myself.

These collaborations, though, were what they too often are for teachers — quick stolen moments during a ten-minute lunch hour or a frowned-upon conversation during bus duty. Even in our Project Outreach workshops, with all our good intentions to be different from and better than the inservices we have so often railed against, we didn't incorporate enough time for these teachers to discover what they already knew and to share it with their colleagues and with us.

The later entries showed that some of the teachers were starting to move beyond simply replacing their textbook's activities with the ones in our workshops and were beginning to reflect on their teaching practices in more general terms.

I am beginning to rethink my entire concept of teaching language. At the beginning of the school year I mapped out how I would sequence my language units. First I would teach parts of speech, then sentences, paragraphs, and then stories. It seemed like a logical sequence, building on previous skills. I have now come to the realization that I did an enormous injustice to my students.... I started thinking about the applicability of what I was teaching. The sole purpose of language is to communicate. I have students in my class who can make a noun possessive, but can't express a complete thought. I had discovered that what I was teaching was not helping my students to become better communicators. In reality, what I had done was increase boredom and frustration levels.

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The prewriting activities that we have discussed during the Project Outreach sessions have been greatly beneficial. I used to ask the students to write without first preparing the students for the assignment. I suppose I thought they could just pull thoughts out of the air. I now see how difficult it must have been for them.

After the school year and the workshops ended, we read all the journals looking for evidence of our success, and we found it. The students of these teachers were reading more books and doing more writing, and many of the teachers were justifiably proud of themselves for a year of hard work.

This week I gathered writing samples to enter in the Young Author's Competition... This was the first year that I actually could go to students' writing folders to select the work. That's quite an achievement for me!

I have to say I'm proud of myself this week! I was truly a writing teacher.

It's exciting to see that some of our kindergartners are beginning to read and to write sentences. They get so tickled with themselves — it is a pure joy to witness.

The teachers at Church Point were bright, experienced, genuinely caring, and, after years of being told what to do, obedient. But obedience has its downside. Some entries, even from as late as March, suggested to me that the teachers had tried what we showed them in the workshops, not because they had decided for themselves that it was good practice, but because we, this year's experts, had shown it to them.

My shame is great because my intentions are good, but my availability of time isn't....I've taken a step back from writing in my classroom. I am overwhelmed with Project READ, Project REAP, this and that—I'd love to just teach and throw out the

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gradebook, the curriculum. Wow! What fun that would be!

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I returned to my classroom today anxious to teach writing the way I know I'm supposed to - the way Marie [the curriculum coordinator] *did and spoke about at the workshop. But – that's a big but, I'm really concerned about teaching language skills. I'm also worried about time constraints.*

Clearly, these teachers had not yet become decision makers in their classrooms. They weren't making choices about what and how to teach based on observations of their students' development. They were simply following the models that had been presented to them—by us, by all the other workshops they'd attended, by the margins of their teachers' manuals, by their own elementary teachers. Instead of examining the options and choosing a practice that seemed best for their students and their circumstances, they were trying to do it all and were understandably overwhelmed in the process. It is terribly hard for any teacher who genuinely cares about doing a good job to let go of "teaching language skills" in the only way she's known unless she understands and believes in the reason for doing so. What's missing in these entries is the *why* that allows us to make significant changes in our practice.

I modeled the poem "If I Were in Charge of the World." We made a big booklet. I struggled to find the significance in doing it, but one big thing I gave the students was total responsibility. They were forced to think all by themselves and follow directions all by themselves. They were eager to do the exercise because I incorporated art, something we hadn't done much of.

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I am reading much more to the students this year than I ever did. I stop to explain the meanings of words and write them on the board. They really seem to enjoy the stories. I worry that the time I spend doing that is not accomplishing very much with many because they seem so far gone at this point. Still, they do seem to enjoy it.

Entries like these bothered me. I read and reread them and my disappointment grew. Why hadn't these teachers seen beneath the surface of the activities we'd demonstrated? We'd presented plenty of theory, shared lots of professional literature, given them time to think, even a new journal to write in. We had, in fact, changed everything about the demeaning and mind-numbing inservices from the past except for one thing — my faulty expectation that the workshops themselves would make a difference independent of the motivations, prior knowledge, and past experiences of the participants.

Seduced once again by the power of the overhead projector, I'd forgotten that the boxes of books, files of activities and journal articles, and crates of student work we'd carried to Church Point represented years of reading, thinking, talking, searching for answers. Years, not months. I have dog-eared the page of *Invitations* on which Regie Routman says it takes years to transform one's practice, and I've reread that sentence countless times to comfort myself when I worry that I'm not as far along on my journey as I should be.

What the Church Point teachers still need, no workshop can give them. They need time and they need to discover their own reasons for making a change. No workshop will be transformative for a teacher who isn't looking for a new and better way. Some of them may never start that search, but many will and some already have. Unfortunately, the high rate of teacher turnover continues at Church Point Elementary. The year following our project, 21 new teachers were hired. Several of the participants in our project were among the departing faculty members, but it is our hope that we provided them and the ones who stayed with some tools and information that will point them in the right direction the next time they feel lost.

The journals were useful tools for both the teachers and the workshop presenters and accomplished the objectives we had for introducing them. But for me, they had other, unexpected effects. They made me examine more closely what my role and my expectations should be as a teacher consultant. They made me angry about attempts at staff development that insult my intelligence and ignore my experience. And they made me even more respectful of all the wise and gifted teachers I have met who manage to find their own ways in spite of it all.

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Taking Out the Furniture, or What's Obvious:

Lessons Learned in the Literature Institute for Teachers

BY MARJORIE ROEMER

"Hellooooo! Hellooooo! ... mingle, mingle, mingle ..." strange sounds emerged from Forman Classroom A during those two weeks last July. I had been looking forward to this for awhile; it was to be the first Literature Institute for Teachers held at the Rhode Island Writing Project, the first institute to focus directly on an exploration of the reading of texts. Here we would model an interactive classroom where reading and writing were mutually supportive and where we could consider ways to make reading a collaborative activity. It was not a brand new venture; I'd been involved in setting up the first such institute held at the South Coast Writing Project in Santa Barbara in 1987; but now it was twelve years later at a Writing Project site that I directed, and I was co-leading the institute with my husband, Don Roemer. Quite different circumstances, and in between were my twelve years as a college teacher and director of freshman writing programs. I wondered how much this summer would be a replication of that earlier one, and how much it would be different.

I remembered much that we had learned in Santa Barbara, and on occasion I had looked back to the article I wrote then for *The Quarterly* (January 1989) "Literate Cultures: Multi-voiced Classrooms." Trying to sum up what the summer had been, I asked then: "How could we teach the destabilized approaches of our discipline? What would be a pedagogy true to our current sense of what it means to know?" The questions remain real to me, but the voice is different. Like an adolescent boy's, my voice seems to have a different timbre, to emanate from a different space altogether. And while not many of my ideas about teaching literature have changed radically, the question of pleasure doesn't make even a brief appearance in my earlier essay.

Our first thoughts when we planned this Literature Institute were about recovering "the pleasure of the text." Walker Percy's essay on "The Loss of the Creature" gets at what we were after. There he shows us just how hard it is to discover what has already been formulated and appropriated for us in advance: we can no longer see the Grand Canyon for ourselves because it is obscured by the picture postcards and the tourist folders; the experience is obscured by its packaging. We wanted to experiment with ways to rescue literature from its packaging in classrooms. For years and years we had heard and read students complaining that the textual analyses of the classroom were tedious and boring, and that what, in fact, their experiences with studying literature had taught them was that anything they might feel or think about a text was most likely wrong.

In Santa Barbara at the LIT institute we had talked a good deal about how much easier it was to be collaborative and respectful of difference when we wrote than when we read. We were used to writing groups and the authority of the author to control her own text, but in reading texts, especially canonical ones, we were still involved in what Sheridan Blau then referred to as "rivalry for the same discursive space." On some level, we couldn't give up the feeling that one reading had to drive out another; we argued more easily than we collaborated. The piece I had written then for *The Quarterly* was largely an attack on the lecture format as a vehicle for teaching literature; it tried to establish multivocalism, the play of many voices, as a more appropriate way to think about our efforts to make meaning of texts. I wished to promote the idea that dialogue was a more fruitful path to uncover what we do when we read and that recognizing this fact would help to develop readers who could more easily embrace dissonance and not always require the closure of consensus. Now it was twelve years later; what form would our dialogues take?

The real beginning was when, on the second day, we were joined by drama teacher Richard Weingartner of Wayland High School, Wayland, MA. That was when we began "hellooooing and mingling." Together we moved the furniture out of the room and made space for activity. We began with warm-up exercises for voice and movement. We clustered together in a mass; we worked in a circle; we ran around the room almost colliding; we called and shouted; we did tongue twisters all as a group. And something about the changed spatial relations, about moving close to one another, about coming out from behind desks, changed everything. We were never the same again.

The day progressed with some more traditional dramatic play. We did a storyboard – on long streams of newsprint spread out on the floor. We did tableau of scenes from the story we were working with (Italo Calvino's "The Canary Prince"). We ad- libbed scenes from the story. Amazingly, nineteen teachers from middle schools and high schools across the state cavorted, improvised, declaimed, without the

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slightest reticence or self-consciousness. Something about the changed space, the possibility of moving as a mass, the freeing of our bodies from the usual restrictions of the classroom got us going as a group in a way that nothing else could.

Certainly, Don and I had consciously planned to introduce drama early in the institute in order to offer the immediacy of textual enactments, embodiments. What I think we had underestimated was the pure power of the corporeal, the way moving and speaking (and taking out the furniture) changed our relationships in that group. Not only did we "get inside" the story "The Canary Prince," we got to play together and be together in a way that restructured the classroom for us.

Our drama coach Richard had offered us the repeated phrase: "All shape has meaning." He said it over and over again, as we staged our scenes and tried to capture in the most economical and clearest ways the significance of a moment or a relationship. One of our final tableau was the wedding scene: the prince and the princess marry and the wicked stepmother is denounced. Our bride demurely flipped her stepmother the finger, and suddenly our mantra had a very specific reference; "All shape has meaning," we solemnly intoned. And we never said the words again without that referent. More than anything, that was what the institute taught us: the power of a group to build a community of meaning.

A day later we turned the classroom into a workshop with every conceivable kind of art material and building supplies. Participants had instructions to make some visual representation of one of the short texts we were considering or another text sufficiently well known to the group. They could work together or alone; they could make representational constructions or symbolic ones, but at the end of our experiments all would have a chance to explain what the relation was between the original text and their creation. Hugh worked alone on the floor, drafting; Barbara and John busily searched for photographs and kept exchanging scissors; Elizabeth plunged into a reverie of painting and construction, creating a moveable swimmer in a sea of language. Don and I managed to work a photograph of our adored grandson into our representation of the Marquez' story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings."

Don and I had approached this particular activity somewhat hesitantly. Don had asked that morning on the drive in if he could just be a spectator (and had been flatly turned down). We both feared one of those loose, collage-making time-wasters, a pleasant interlude but not very thoughtful or instructive. We were wrong. Again, just the change of activity, of physicality, of sharing in the room made a huge difference. Beyond that, we began to understand one another's gifts and thought processes in new ways. Gayle showed herself to have an uncanny ability to make interesting symbolic representations with the simplest means. For me, her stark eye and keyhole will forever be a part of any reading of "The Tell-Tale Heart." Elizabeth was really an artist, creating beautiful, ingenious works right there in our midst, a wash of pastel shapes and lines of poetry buoyed on the waves of her beautifully rendered ocean. Christina built intricacy into every choice of color and design and explained her thinking in detail: how the colorful petticoat revealed the ambivalence of the otherwise demurely dressed heroine; how she stood at a window which marked her isolation from the world. We learned about texts and how our colleagues envisioned them; we learned about our colleagues and their particular styles of experiencing the world around them and of expressing themselves. But maybe most importantly, we violated the arrangements of the classroom; we came out from behind our desks and our classroom talk to be together in another way. Don's discomfort with this form of expression was an interesting counterpoint to his obvious facility with language. Other people were fluent here in ways they could not be with words alone.

The images we created that day became part of the world we inhabited together in those two weeks. Each day new connections bound us together – Beth's homemade scones and jam, for instance – but, perhaps most important to the culture we made together were the jokes we came to share, our private language. Our best joke became the title for our final anthology of writings: *That's Obvious.*

How can I explain the joke? It's one of those "you had to be there" experiences. At the least, it requires a little bit of background. Don and I met in graduate school; we've been talking about literature and teaching nonstop for thirty-five years, but we've never taught together. Each of us has spent roughly the same amount of time teaching college as we have teaching high school (about thirty years in the classroom for each of us by now) and we've both had some team-teaching experience, but the thought of teaching together was alternately exciting and frightening. We interrupt each other. We don't always agree, and our

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disagreements now have long histories and well-worn grooves. What would it be like? Mostly, it was great. We had fun; we felt exhilarated; and the group was part of it. But occasionally we bristled at each other, and the group was part of that too. At one moment I said something about a text and Don said, "But that's obvious." I stopped cold. "Do you know how that makes me feel?" It was one of those moments.

But it also became a pivotal moment for our summer. It became our way to focus on how we respond to one another's comments, what we do with what other people say, what Sheridan had so much earlier named "rivalry for the same discursive space." The ability to examine that moment, to have it there before us, open to inquiry, was the key to our summer's success. It became a shorthand for us: people would say, "I know that's obvious"... or "obviously" when they wanted to invoke the whole question of what one person takes for granted and another doesn't, or what can be dismissed by someone else whose focus is different. It became our way of constantly reminding one another of the dangers in debate, the ways we might belittle or pass over the contribution of another. The joke led to others: the men bonding together to extravagantly praise one another's sensitivity; people feeling free to challenge other people when they seemed to be too quick to absorb another's comment into their own and to pass over the value of the initial statement. Over and over again, "obviously" had its resonance in that room, just as "all shape has meaning" had come to have special meaning just for us. When we talked about putting our last journal entries together in an informal collection, the title was obvious: it had to be.

In our work with texts we drew on many sources; one was a book by Kathleen McCormick, Gary Waller and Linda Flower called *Reading Texts*. Don and I have both used it in teaching, and we are particularly interested in the strategy it offers for considering the repertoire of a text in relation to the repertoire of a reader. While we all bring our own interests and understandings to our readings, the text itself also emerges from a complex web of literary and ideological understandings; it, too, has a repertoire. What the summer enacted for us was the way a class, or a group, builds its own repertoire together, how much what we read and say and do together shapes the readings we perform within the class.

Stories, experiences, habits of mind get shared in such a setting, and they become part of the shared text of the class. Long ago (or as I hear my three year old grandson saying, "a time ago"), I was very interested in the concept of intertextuality, the way one text rests on another, the way we read across the texts of our experience and our histories onto whatever new text we confront. Everything I said in 1989 I still believe: that a classroom is a place for interrogating the kinds of responses we have to texts, where those responses come from and how they can be elaborated, extended, refined by the interplay of the group and the differences within it. But in 1989 I didn't leave much space for jokes. And now in 1999 it was the running jokes that knit our experience together, that created indelible imagery that would alter us as readers.

We know that writing is vivid and memorable when it provides us with sensory detail, when it creates memorable scenes for

us. I think we fail to recognize how much the memorable scenes of the classroom are the primary sites for learning. Students remember the personal, the unusual, the emotionally charged: the day someone's fly was open; the day the electricity went out; the argument that took place between two class members. They remember what is disruptive and what is personally affecting. What seems different to me in my response to the two institutes, divided by over ten years, is my own sense of how much of the work that occurred was extra-intellectual – occurred because of personal drama, physical embodiments, emotions in play, and our bemused ability to share these moments and turn them into humor that bound us together as a community.

I remember the opening of Donald McQuade's Chair's address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1991: "I now know much better what I thought I had known before." I feel in something of the same position. I knew a number of these things about reading and

Taking Out the Furniture, or What's Obvious: Lessons Learned in the Literature Institute for Teachers

communities, but I now know them from the inside, in a more direct, palpable way, through experience not just through intellection.

Some years ago at one of our fall renewal meetings everyone was asked to write briefly about something he or she remembered from the summer institutes. I wrote about a presentation that a speaker had made that had stayed with me and been useful; everyone else in the room wrote about the feelings they had being part of the group. It was an instructive moment for me. It makes me remember that our families are knit together by those funny anecdotes that link us: when Don insisted on backing up into a tree and we began our vacation at the Cape with a shattered rear window; when we all got on Lizabeth's inflatable swan and it sank; when the dog ate the afikomen for Passover and we couldn't find it.

What I learned from this summer institute was how much the intertextuality of a classroom is dramatized by what happens in that room and how valuable it is to seize those moments and use them, to allow them to bond the group and highlight the learning that is taking place. Developing our own language, our own set of jokes and memories makes us into a cohesive unit, and the way that we have read together becomes palpable and memorable through this set of memories.

Now, when school reform is more and more shaped by standardized testing and the insistence upon explicit expectations reiterated over and over again from every bulletin board and in every sort of rubric, it seems important to remember how human teaching and learning are, how much they occur because we have shared experiences. Learning to become a more accomplished and more sensitive reader is about extending one's empathy and capacity for experience. It is through experiences and shared moments of insight that we grow. New ideas are important, but the route to change is, as the National Writing Project has always understood, through social interactions that make ideas palpable.

Over the last years I think I have come to understand in ways that I didn't fully grasp initially just how important the social part of discourse is. I don't just mean rhetorical situation or cultural context, or even the power of eating and chatting with peers; I mean the intricate, crosshatched designs of consciousness and how our interactions with one another and with the world around us (every kind of text that there is) shape and reshape our understandings. Here is an excerpt from one of Don's journals, the morning of July 22, 1999:

> *The Kennedy episode keeps running in the background, like my RealPlayer G2 Plus program, activated by other programs when sound is required. When I was thinking last night about my visual project for today's class, I immediately went to the sea—Moby Dick (not really possible — too big, too white) and then my favorite, Billy Budd wrapped in his hammock, weighted with shot, and dropped into the ocean. And even as I write about it, Benjamin Britten's operatic adaptation sounds in my ear as the thematic sea music, undulating, serves as score for Captain Vere's intonation of Melville's description of the moment— "And the sea fowl . . . croaked requiem . . . and the ship sailed on." So of course today's burial at sea resounds with these associations and I'm sad, quietly, deeply sad, for so much more than the death of one who, after all, was only an extraordinarily handsome rich young man who published a marginal political journal. But he's more, because we read him as more, and I read him as more in my own way — Billy Budd becomes Kennedy, vice versa, and the music plays on.*

Don is a pretty complex reader, but so are we all. The frame may not be Melville and Britten for all of us, but there are always frames through which all our new understandings are filtered. And these frames are nothing less than our lives, our experiences, the things that have meaning for us and in which we have a stake. Having a chance to

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look at these individual differences respectfully allows us to learn about texts and reading, as well as about ourselves and one another. We had a space for those two weeks where Don's thoughts and everyone else's had equal opportunity. We didn't spend time judging or scoring our responses; we just enjoyed and profited from them all. And because we worked in many modes: acting and drawing, playing music, collaborating in any number of ways, we weren't overly intimidated by someone's clear gifts in one direction. Different people showed us different things.

For me, the gift of this summer, like so many Writing Project experiences, has been to move from theoretical understanding to enactment, to see and feel something happening rather than just to conceptualize it. Taking out the furniture was palpable – it allowed us to move around, come out from behind the desks, even collide. As I reflect on the modulations of my own voice, I see again what it means to take out some of the furniture and to move into a space where language is simpler and where words are only one of the ways we communicate and share.

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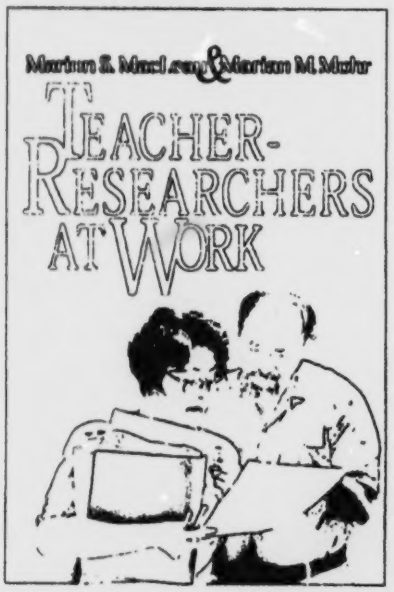

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See You Next Year:

The Writing Process in the Looping Classroom

BY ALISA DANIEL

My interest in looping, or teaching the same group of children for two consecutive years, emerged accidentally a few years ago. I had taught kindergarten for a year when I received a new assignment: first grade. On the first day, my new charges came in quietly, nervously looked around, hardly speaking a word. Most didn't want to say good-bye to their parents. Over the ensuing days, many had a difficult time settling into school routines in my unfamiliar room, and I had to remind them over and over about our class rules. We repeatedly role played and modeled simple procedures, like how to set up their papers (name on the top right, date on the top left), and how and where to turn in homework, finished work, journals and supplies.

However, a few of the children had been with me in kindergarten the year before. From day one of first grade, those students were different.

Mark, Kristan, and Katherine entered my room with confidence and anticipation. Mark immediately began to take charge of setting things up in my classroom. Kristan, painfully shy only one year earlier, bounded in with her mom and gave me a big hug, and then proceeded to help Mark begin to set out art supplies, place morning papers on the desks and sharpen pencils. Katherine entered without her mother, explaining that she wanted to come in by herself. I was amazed at her independence.

The differences between my "old" students and my "new" ones didn't end on the first day of school. I came to realize that I felt differently about "my kids" from last year. I automatically depended on them for help with organizing learning centers, reminding others how to follow through with completing and returning papers and supplies to the correct areas, and even tutoring the new students. Time and time again I thought, "I could be a lot further along with my teaching if my entire class were as settled and comfortable as Mark, Kristan, and Katherine."

The second year, the children knew their classmates, their teacher, classroom procedures and expectations. This knowledge gave them extraordinary confidence on the first day of school, confidence that extended to their writing.

Two years later, after a move to another town and another first-grade class, I decided, with the agreement of the principal, to try looping with my students. I also decided, at the urging of my colleagues at the Southwest Georgia Writing Project, to document my students' growth in writing over a two-year period. I would become a teacher-researcher.

Throughout the next two years, I collected a variety of data on my students' progress in writing and their attitudes about looping, including survey responses, free writing, interview transcripts, responses to writing prompts and other writing activities. I also kept a teacher log for recording my ideas and concerns as I experimented with looping. I wanted to identify positive as well as negative aspects of looping for both the children, particularly in terms of their writing, and for me.

Indeed, I found many advantages of looping over traditional scheduling. As I'd predicted, I found that I had additional instructional time at the beginning of the second year, but I discovered other advantages I hadn't considered. Because I was familiar with the students' abilities, I was able to plan activities for the second year to address individual needs. And because the students were familiar with my writing program, I was able to progress more quickly with my writing curriculum. Looping also allowed me to observe growth in students' writing I otherwise would have missed in the regular one-year rotation.

The students also benefited from the looping classroom. The second year, the children knew their classmates, their teacher, classroom procedures and expectations. This knowledge gave them extraordinary confidence on the first day of school, confidence that extended to their writing. They were comfortable with the writing processes we had learned the year before and were immediately willing to experiment with their writing. And, most importantly, the students forged a two-year bond with me and with one another that some children described as "family."

More Teaching Time

On the first day of second grade, I had time that in previous years was taken up with nametags and seating charts. My students and I sat around in a circle and talked about what we had done over the summer vacation. We laughed about funny incidents

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from first grade, and we rebuilt our classroom community.

We were able to start the year exactly where we had left off before the summer vacation began. The students pulled out their journals and portfolios from the previous year and reviewed their writings. We listened to old favorites, and then they chose stories that they wanted to rewrite and considered ideas for new pieces. We accomplished what would have been a month's worth of work in a couple of days.

My previous Septembers were spent modeling and gradually increasing the amount of time children spent writing. This year, however, the children went right to work on their stories. I had more time to conference with individual or small groups of children as they wrote. Instead of going over writing process basics such as prewriting exercises,. I could teach advanced techniques. For example, in September I offered students examples of how to add details or images that might make a piece of writing come to life. We also discussed various leads or hooks that writers use. In the past, it took me months to get to these advanced techniques. When I used terms like "audience," "conference" or "editor," they knew immediately what I meant.

It was hard to believe that we had been away for a whole summer. Because of the familiarity with each other and the classroom, we settled easily into a comfortable routine.

I also noticed that while other classes were practicing line rules and classroom procedures, my class was enjoying one another and had only to be reminded of how we did things last year.

As I'd foreseen years ago, looping gave me extra time for writing activities that would normally have taken a back seat to beginning-of-the-year procedures.

We spent our first week of school writing poetry outdoors. As we sat out on the backless, wooden benches, the children wrote about what they saw. Jenny wrote:

My beautiful blue eyes behold:
Brown tree that had no leaves,
Black rabbit hopping on the grown,
Black butterfly in the sky,
Brown bird nest in the tree.

Jenny and the other students thrived in the freedom and creativity of this beginning of the year experience that most agreed was a lot more fun than learning from a new teacher how to head a paper.

Individualizing

Since I knew my first graders would be with me the next year, over the summer I was able to plan activities with their individual needs in mind. For example, Tedrick had struggled in first grade with word recognition and spelling, so during the summer I put together a pocket chart that contained pictures and words on cards grouped in pockets labeled with the letters of the alphabet. As the year began, I passed out the cards and had the children identify the pictures and words, and then I showed them how to place the cards into the chart alphabetically. Tedrick used the pocket chart frequently to help him write. He felt more secure as he wrote, and he became less frustrated with himself when he did not know how to spell words that he needed. The other children used the pocket chart as well.

Amy developed an interest in poetry in the first grade, so over the summer I purchased several different poetry books with her in mind. She especially liked the Shel Silverstein collection. I showed her that poetry did not have to rhyme and that she could make her words and phrases move around the page instead of just in straight lines.

Birthdays
Birthdays is....
Lots of fun with balloons, fun opening presents in the room, fun getting to pop balloons.

A second poem was written down the middle of the page.

Water is...
A slap on the face,
Such a mess,
Like mud outside,
Cold, and liquid,
It turns into snow in the winter,
Water turns into ice cubes in the freezer,
White rain falls like rain drops,
Helps plants grow.

Joe, a blond-haired, blue-eyed little boy, was extremely shy. Because I had had Joe in first grade, I knew about his focus on creating repetitive lists in his writing. Joe needed to learn other ways to approach an idea, and I wanted to help him. So over the summer I planned a poetry unit to demonstrate to Joe and others ways to turn lists into poetry.

For example, when asked to write about the things he saw in the outdoor classroom, Joe listed: "I saw a butterfly. I saw a bird house.

I saw a toad stool." After some instruction and revision, Joe wrote:

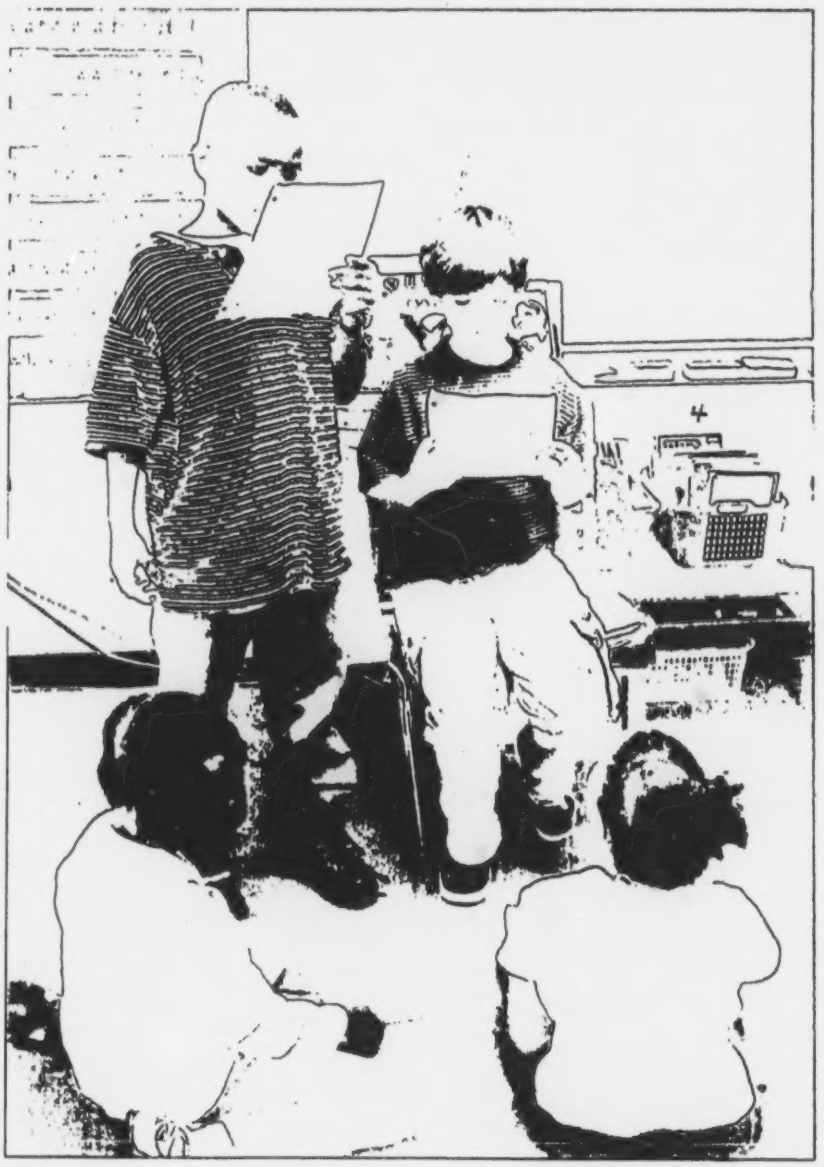
My beautiful blue eyes behold,
Blue bird in the sky,
Orange butterfly on a flower,
Red and black ants fighting.

Looping gave me the time I needed to think about Joe, Amy, Tedrick, and the others, and devise a plan for addressing their individual needs.

Moving Forward

The second year, revision became more than recopying for many of my students. In first grade, the students spent their time writing one draft that they seldom wanted to change. I spent hours modeling and demonstrating how to add more details to make their stories clearer. But it was not until the second year, when they pulled out their old drafts and journals, that they could begin to see how they could make their stories more exciting. They had had a whole summer away from their writing, and then, reading it as for the first time, they were able to ask themselves the same questions that I had asked the previous year. They were finally able to see their stories from a reader's point of view and begin to understand what readers needed from their writing.

Publishing became important to my class during the second year. We published a class book which featured stories and poems from our two years together called "First Servings, Second Helpings." Looping gave the children the opportunity to take the first serving of stories from the first year and add to them or give them a second helping.



The children had access to their writings and journals from first grade. They enjoyed looking back at their previous work. Many times they would laugh at their own first-grade stories, commenting on how little they had written. Many students would ask to rewrite their work. Joe found a story about a trip to Stone Mountain that he wanted to work on.

His story from first grade read: *I went to stone mountain.*

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Below his one-sentence story was a picture of him traveling in his family car. His second-grade story about Stone Mountain was much more detailed:

> *I went to Stone Mountain. It took 4 hours to get there. When it got dark I watched the laser show. Then it was time to go home.*

He included a picture of himself sitting outside watching the laser light show.

They had had a whole summer away from their writing, and then, reading it as for the first time, they were able to ask themselves the same questions that I had asked the previous year. They were finally able to see their stories from a reader's point of view and begin to understand what readers needed from their writing.

Amy found a story about her birthday party in her first-grade folder:

> *Today is my 6 brbay my mom is gin to pik my up urle I hop my sibr has a gud brbay prte. I lik my sibr. I love my sebr. My sibr is and my famul is to. Thay are cuming fom the pas wara yus to liv.*

[Today is my sixth birthday. My mom is going to pick me up early. I hope my sister has a good time at my birthday party. I like my sister. I love my sister. My sister is and my family is too. They are coming from the place where we used to live.]

Amy's early second-grade writing shows her inability to hear and write her sounds. However, her story is much more focused and detailed. But because i was written at the beginning of second grade rather than later into the year, her reversals and phonetic problems are very much apparent:

My Favorite Party
By Amy

My favorit birthday was my 6 birthday. Becas we got to paly in the pool and sandbox. In the sandbox we bet for checs. In the pool we paled in the pool with the watr toys. We heb godfish. My cak was chat lake a fish. Aftr we got thro eating, we wran out in the bak rod. We state doing the little centers. One was. We had to get shving crm on a papr pas. We had to go to the water. Wat we had to do was get a swt gun and swt the shv crm of. And a noter one was we got to go on the swing set on the swing set you koud swing or silid ora the mokbas. And a nutr lite center is in the sandbox you haf to dug for sheshites the last centers is in the pool In the pool tus wat toys. You can biv word the pool. Tan we ran to the hons and up the pors and jrk limlad thn we weit bak to the swingsite and sandbox and pool and swt gous

Tan my friends wit home and I rasted.

[My favorite birthday was my 6 birthday. Because we got to play in the pool and sandbox. In the sandbox we bet for chances in the pool. We played in the pool with the water toys. We had goldfish. My cake was shaped like a fish. After we got through eating, we ran out in the back yard. We started doing the little center. One was we had to get shaving cream on a paper plate. We had to go to the water. What we had to do was get a squirt gun and squirt the shaving cream off. And another one was we got to go on the swing set. On the swing set you could swing or slide or the monkey bars. And another little center is in the sandbox. You have to dig for seashells. The last center is the pool. In the pool there was water toys. You can dive under the pool. Then we ran to the house and up the porch and drank lemonade. Then we went back to the swing set and sandbox and pool and squirt guns. Then my friends went home and I rested.]

Later in the second-grade year, Amy spent much more time with her revisions and editing. By Christmas, she had taken over her writing and would not finish a piece until she had it close to perfect. She found a story from first grade about Christmas. She rewrote the story from a different and more personal point of view.

First grade:

A Christmas Eve Dream
By Amy

> *Once upon a time a famley got a Christmas tree and it was little thay put the litte chrstmas tree in a pat of water in the loving room and thay put a lot of chirtmas ornaments and a sart at the tap of the litt chirmas tree it grw and grw*

[Once upon a time a family got a Christmas tree and it was little. They put the little

Christmas tree in a pot of water in the living room and they put a lot of Christmas ornaments and star at the top of the little Christmas tree. It grew and grew.]

Second grade:

My Best Christmas Ever
By Amy

"Wake up Katie, said my mom. "Uh, uh," I said until my mom said, "It is Christmas morning." I got out of bed and went down the stairs as fast as I could and looked under the Christmas tree. I asked my mom if I could open the presents.

She said that little girls aren't allowed to open prerts and me and my sisert said, "We can too. You're just trying to trick us." And she laughed while she said, "Well you could." I was so happy. I saw a lot of games and I said, "Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" I loved the games so much that I started to kiss them.

Then I looked under the Christmas tree again and I saw more toys and more toys and more toys. But I just stared at them and I wanted to open all of my games but my mom said, "You can open one present today." Then I saw a TV and a VCR too and the tape Swan Princess. And when I found out that the TV was going to be in my room, I was so happy. I thought we could watch TV at night without my mom and dad knowing. And I could sit in bed while I watch TV. Then I played my game Guess Who and I won. And that was my best Christmas ever.

The second-grade story had far fewer spelling or grammatical errors than the August story about her birthday. She had made great strides to over come her phonetic problems.

Although I have since moved to another town, I remain close to many of those students and their parents. Some have come to visit, and others call or write letters and cards. I cherish these lasting relationships.

Family Ties

At the end of the second year, I had the students write about being in the same class for two years. Most of the students wrote about the classroom as a family. They wrote about caring for each other:

The Best Thing About
Being in This Class

The best thing about being in this class is good because we have really good time together. We share things and take turns. We say funny jokes. Our teacher says that we are a family. I agree with her. I think we need to take up time with others. We still are a family. We take care of each other. That's why I'm glad I am in the same class. We might even let our friends down, but we still are a family. And that's why I'm in this class.

—Charles

The Best Class

The best thing about being in this class for two years is having the best friends, Amy, Jackie, and Sharon and Krissy. And having the best teacher in the earth. It is really good because the class seems like a family to me.

—Jenny

We were a family of writers who wrote and rewrote our stories. Over two years we formed strong bonds that made us a writing community. Everyone understood that the process was as important as the product, and students came to better understand the process. They came to understand that writing was important to me, and therefore it became important to them.

For two years I was allowed to watch them grow and blossom as writers. I had watched them write, rewrite and revisit their writing for two years. They were able to look back at the previous year and make decisions as real writers.

But for me, looping with these students gave me much more than just a chance to look at their writing for two years. I was given a family. Although I have since moved to another town, I remain close to many of those students and their parents. Some have come to visit, and others call or write letters and cards. I cherish these lasting relationships.

I would recommend looping to any teacher. For me, the first year was good, and the second year was wonderful. The benefits were more than academic; as my students said, "We are a family."

Alisa Daniel teaches at Screven County Elementary in Sylvania, Georgia. She is a TC with the Southwest Georgia Writing Project.

Behind Their Backs:

Proximity and Insult in Student Response

BY ROGER GREEN

The response group has become a staple of language arts classrooms. However, many teachers have kept a distance from these groups as they meet, believing that to intrude will have the effect of damaging the delicate chemistry that is emerging among the writers. But at the beginning of this school year, I decided to take a step closer to these groups. I wanted to know more about what goes on in the minds of my ninth-grade students as they work together on their writing. I gathered information by observing groups as they worked and by asking the students to write to me about their experiences. I thought I knew what happens in reading/writing groups, but I have been surprised by what I learned. In fact, I did not fully appreciate the intellectual and social challenges reading/writing groups pose.

For the last seven years, my students at the magnet school for science and technology where I teach have been writing and sharing in small groups. In recent years my students have commented on one another's writing in two ways: with the author of the piece present in "reading/writing groups," and in the author's absence in "publication committees." In a reading/writing group, each author reads his or her paper aloud, takes notes on the group's discussion of the paper, and later revises. In the publication committee, since the author of the piece is not a member of the group, a student acts as an agent for the author. This person reads the story aloud, takes notes on the discussion, and then writes a letter to the author explaining the group's thinking, elaborating where appropriate. I had viewed these two types of groups as nearly identical because they followed such similar procedures. In my mind, a publication committee was simply a reading/writing group working on a paper written by a student from another class. I came to see that students work quite differently when the author is not present. To illuminate this difference, I need to explain how my students came to be working in publication committees.

My department has been using publication committees in a variety of formats for eight years. Some years I exchange student papers with those from another teacher. This year I rotated the papers among my own three ninth-grade English classes. The students were primarily writing fiction in a variety of forms. The students took the first drafts of their papers to their reading/writing groups in their own classes, and I gave the second drafts to publication committees in another of my classes.

Before the reading/writing groups met for the first time, I took extensive steps to prepare the students to talk with each other about their writing All of this preparation also applied to their work in publication committees.

The initial preparation consisted of several steps. First, the whole class commented together on a story written by one of the students in the class. I made extra copies of the story, and the whole class sat in a circle. The author read the piece aloud and then we talked about it. As the students commented, I led a discussion about the comments they made. We noticed that the story had strong points. We noticed that in some places characters or settings weren't described very clearly, and some parts were not logical. I emphasized the need to phrase comments kindly. Then, each student wrote comments about the first draft of a story written several years ago by a student of mine. After everyone had written his or her own comments, we shared ideas about the story and identified the most significant problems with the piece. The whole process of drafting, followed by reading/writing group meetings and further revision, stretched out over twelve weeks. The students went through two revisions again later in the year, this time taking about five weeks since I did not need to repeat the initial preparation.

After the initial work as a whole class, the students met in reading/writing groups to talk about their own stories. I outlined a procedure similar to the one we had used working together. The students would read each paper aloud, discuss it and take notes. Each group had four members and two copies of each student's paper. The groups met for four 45-minute sessions. After each session, I collected the notes the students had made during the discussion, gave the students a grade on their comments, and wrote notes to them about the quality of the comments. I also sat with groups and helped them comment.

The students revised with the help of the reading/writing group's comments. I collected the revised drafts and passed them onto publication committees in a different class. For example, I passed the drafts from my 5th-period class to groups in my 6th-period class. Students could submit their papers anonymously if they wished.

Behind Their Backs: Proximity and Insult in Student Response

As the students settled down to work in publication committees on the revised drafts, I scanned the classroom for problems. The students sat in tidy circles of four spaced evenly around the room. One student in each group read a draft aloud, and the others followed on copies, just as they had done when they met in reading/writing groups. The students had worked well in reading/writing groups on the first draft of their own papers, so I felt they knew what they were doing.

I was just about to stand back and congratulate myself for preparing the students to talk about writing when I detected an ugly, sneering laugh from a group by the windows. *Are they off topic already?* I wondered irritably. No, they were obviously involved with the story. A student resumed reading aloud as I casually strolled over. They looked up at me, but kept working. I recognized the story they were reading. It was a sensitive reminiscence of a real-life, tragic experience. Under my stern gaze the group stopped giggling and worked quietly. Across the room a group broke into peals of derisive laughter. "And look at this sentence," I heard someone whisper, provoking more snickers. I moved in their direction. As soon as I moved away, the first group began to cackle again. Then another group started to howl. "This really sucks," a student in a third group hissed, his group nodding enthusiastically.

I could barely contain my frustration. I could not understand why my students would insult the work of other students. They had not been cruel when they worked in reading/writing groups on their own stories. Their arrogance truly caught me off guard.

Fortunately, for the most part, I contained my aggravation. I was a researcher, after all, as well as a teacher. I watched in bewilderment over the next few days as groups of ordinarily mild-mannered students in each of my classes ripped through story after story from another class. I listened in on groups of barbarians as long as I could stand it, occasionally resorting to snide comments whispered under my breath. Rather than just canceling the publication committees, I decided to see if I could figure out what was going on.

I could not understand why my students would insult the work of other students. They had not been cruel when they worked in reading/writing groups on their own stories. Their arrogance truly caught me off guard.

It wasn't until I read the students' final evaluations of the whole process that I began to understand what had been happening in the publication committees. Tom explained it this way in his log:

> *Being on a publication committee is slightly different from being part of a reading/writing group. The really 'nice' difference is that the author is not present, so the group doesn't have to be quite so polite and cautious. Instead, the group is able to really dissect the story without having to worry about the author being offended. Later, comments can be 'pacified' or censored somewhat.*

Lisa put it even more bluntly in her log: "The publication committee was much more fun. If a paper really stunk, you could say so and not worry about hurting the writer's feelings."

Freed by the author's absence to speak honestly, my students delighted in brainstorming ideas about the story. When they saw something they didn't like, they said so, and the whole group felt free to agree enthusiastically. The process was exhilarating and creative. Student after student praised the freedom of the publication committee. Hannah put it this way:

> *Being in a r/w group and being on a publication committee were two totally different experiences. In one you are dealing with the author and in the other you're not. When you deal with the author you are careful of the feelings expressed and of how you phrase things. When you aren't dealing with the author you are down right blatant and say exactly what's on your mind. It is almost two totally different ways of looking at a story. Not that one is good and the other is bad. They just get you different results.*

My students' comments about publication committees raised questions in my mind about reading/writing groups. Hannah's comment suggested to me that the reading/writing sessions required a different mode of thought from the publication committees. I realized that before making a comment in a reading/writing group, the student had to decide how the writer would react. The student not only had to figure out what to say about a piece, but had to decide

whether the comment would do more harm than good. The reading/writing group required a measured, sensitive and necessarily self-edited response. The publication committee session, on the other hand, invited uninhibited brainstorming of ideas. Students felt free to say whatever came to mind without worrying about how it sounded. This seems to me to be an important observation about the way students look at the writing of their peers. Even in a near-ideal situation in which literate, well-intentioned students truly want to be helpful, they must struggle with how to phrase their comments kindly. Not only that, but they must be aware of their body language so the author does not guess their thoughts. At least this is the way they felt. Nearly every student reported being sensitive to the feelings of the author, if the author was present.

Each student in the publication committee wrote a letter to one author explaining the group's ideas about the story. I was worried about how the letters would sound, but when they came in, they were courteous and thoughtful. In a few cases, the letter writer was overzealous, but the vast majority of letters were models of decorum. In their final evaluations of the whole process, the authors praised the letters' seriousness and insight. It was clear that in most cases, the publication committees had been at least as helpful as the reading/writing groups, and in many cases more helpful.

So how did the letters end up being so sensitive if the groups had been busy dissecting the stories? Rachel pointed out that being able to shape the comments into a letter was helpful:

> *It was hard reading a story and then immediately having to come up with ideas to make it better. But if I got to take a story home and look at it, comments were much easier to make and I think they were more helpful to the authors.... It was great being able to plan out exactly what I was going to say and how I wanted to say it.*

Charlie put it a little more cynically:

> *One thing I learned from being in a publication committee is that people don't always say what they mean. When my pub. committee and I wrote comments to the authors, we often disguised what we meant to make the letter sound nicer.*

So, after the group brainstormed lots of ideas about a piece, the letter writer took notes home and quietly decided how to phrase everything and also decided which comments to omit. With this extra time, few of the students failed to write a letter that was both polite and helpful.

Some students noticed a difference in the kind of comments made in the two groups. Walter noticed that

> *...in a r/w group, comments tend to be about details, and if a general comment comes up, the comment is usually pretty vague. This is mostly because the comments are spur of the moment type things. The commentor hasn't had time to think about it yet. On the other hand, in publication committees, the people have a week to think about the story. The comments tend to be more meaningful and deeper than in the r/w groups.*

Walter meant that the letter writer had a week from the time he or she first saw the story until the letter was due.

Even though my students reported advantages to working in publication committees, they also recognized the strengths of reading/writing groups. Perhaps the most important advantage is that the writer can ask and answer questions. In the reading/writing group, work on the paper can be a conversation. As Jack put it,

> *I think that what really influenced my revision the most was my r/w group's comments. They seemed to be more helpful because I actually sat down with them and could see exactly what they were talking about. When I got my publication letter, I didn't know what they were talking about in some places, and they weren't right there with me so I couldn't get any comments in really great detail like I could with my r/w group.*

The conversational nature of the reading/writing group also lends itself to follow-up questions. Linda noticed that "in a r/w group, the author is sitting right in front of you. You can ask the author questions and listen to their responses. You can also respond to their responses and any questions they have about their story."

Alan had an experience that could happen in a reading/writing group but not in a publication committee. As his group discussed his story about a trip to Czechoslovakia, he began to tell anecdotes that

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were not in his paper. The group encouraged him to include these funny anecdotes.

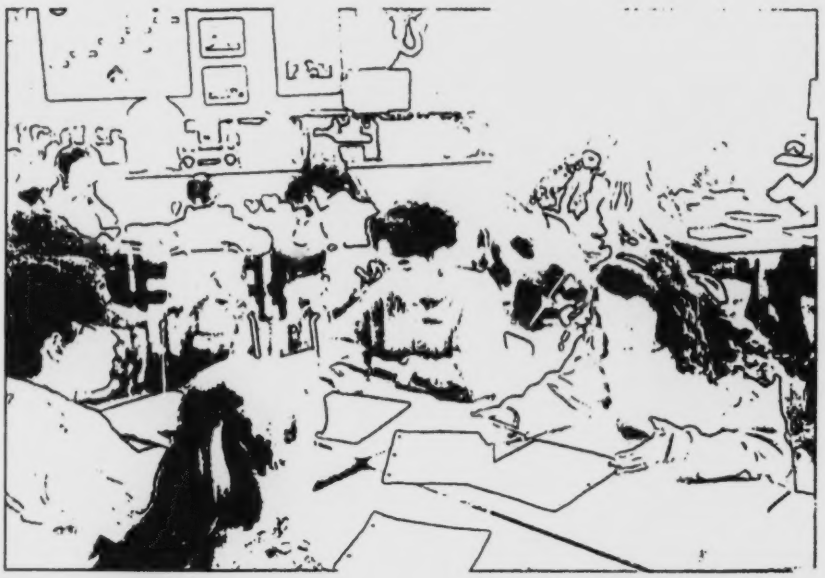
Even though Louise appreciated the give and take of the reading/writing group she recognized the value of the objectivity of the publication committee:

> *I liked my r/w group better because I was able to defend myself and my story, and make 'on the spot' corrections. However, I think my publication committee helped my story more because they saw it from an objective point of view and made judgments based solely on their ... impressions and not my presence waiting to clear up an confusion.*

Mary made a similar point:

> *In the r/w group, I could talk with the author and get answers to my questions. It was easier to explain how you felt and also give the writer information they needed. In the publication committee, it was possible to look at the writing objectively and give advice about overall impressions.*

My students worked on the pieces in the reading/writing groups first, and later submitted revised drafts to the publication committees. Thus, the publication committees were working on more polished drafts. It may be that the more distanced, formal publication committee lends itself to work on a more polished draft, but I'm not sure this is the case. I suspect that more important factors may be the student's relationship with the reading/writing group and the nature of the individual story.



Later in the year, the students went through the whole process again. This second time, I gave them a choice of whether they wanted their first drafts evaluated by their own reading/writing group or by a publication committee from another class. In spite of the high praise the publication committees had received after the work on the first paper, only 10 students out of 76 requested a publication committee. Thirty-three students requested that a publication committee evaluate their second draft. In conversation, some students said they chose the publication committee to get a more objective opinion; others because they didn't want to have to face their group with a story they didn't like. Still others chose to bring the story to a reading/writing group because they didn't want anyone outside the class to see it. Students continued to be more openly critical in the publication committees than in the reading/writing groups, though the difference was less pronounced. I gave the students the option of changing to a different group for the second paper, and a few students chose to move. During work on the second paper, I observed that the reading/writing groups seemed more comfortable about talking to the writer, and the publication committees seemed less gleeful in criticizing the absent author.

After examining writing groups this year, I'm wondering about the implications of what I have noticed. Hannah may be right that the thinking process is different if the author is present. The thinking process in the reading/writing group is more compressed. Students have to come up with comments and self-evaluate the comments at the same time. In the publication committee the students brainstorm the comments first and later analyze the comments, deciding what to keep and what to leave out.

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The students take the issue of confronting an author face-to-face seriously. The students in the reading/writing group were as worried about offending the author as about helping with the story. This sentiment was reported independently by nearly every student. This was true even when the group members simply had questions about the story. Certainly this feeling will diminish with time and positive experiences, but it should not be taken lightly by the teacher introducing students to writing groups.

I have come to understand that giving students the opportunity to talk about writing without the writer present sharpens their commenting skills by simplifying their task. With the writer missing, the commentors can concentrate on the writing without worrying about the complex social skills required to talk directly to a writer.

The reading/writing group requires on-the-spot analysis that lends itself to producing a mixture of helpful and unhelpful comments. Students reported that about half of the comments their reading/writing groups made were useful. They reported that nearly all of the publication committee's comments were helpful. The publication committee had several advantages: time to reflect on the comments, time to evaluate and then eliminate ones that seemed useless, and time to organize the comments logically. I suspect that the publication committees produced many silly, extraneous or trivial comments which were omitted from the letters.

The conversational nature of the reading/writing group was an enormous advantage, especially if the writer did a significant share of the talking. If the writer used the time to ask questions of the group and to answer the group's questions, then full advantage was being taken of this strength of the reading/writing group.

Communication about writing is difficult. In the reading/writing groups, some students worded their comments so diplomatically that the author didn't fully understand the point. As Ali mentioned, the letters from the publication committee were not always clear. Students did report that hearing the same comment from more than one source was very convincing. Sometimes a student had to hear the same comment from the reading/writing group, and then later from the publication committee and from the teacher before it finally sank in.

The students learned as much about writing by reading other students' papers as they did by getting comments on their own work. This was especially true in the publication committees where the students felt free to talk about what really worked and what didn't in a story. I did notice that students were quite capable of deriding a piece for the same faults their own writing exhibited. And, actually, they noticed this fact themselves, which is, I suppose, the point.

In the future, I will continue to use both reading/writing groups and publications committees with student writing. Through my teacher research project, I have come to understand that giving students the opportunity to talk about writing without the writer present sharpens their commenting skills by simplifying their task. With the writer missing, the commentors can concentrate on the writing without worrying about the complex social skills required to talk directly to a writer. However, publication committees can't replace reading/writing groups because authors need the experience of hearing directly from commentors, and more importantly, authors need to talk about their work, responding to questions and suggestions. With practice, commentors can master the skills they need to explain their ideas to an author in person. As I continue to work with student writing, I will be sensitive to my students' hesitancy to speak honestly with authors. I will spend more time modeling commenting skills as the teacher, and I will provide more structured activities where students can practice commenting on writing. Teaching students to talk about their writing is a rich and complex undertaking, and one that is well worth the necessary investment of time and energy.

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Note-Taking and Note-Making in Freshman Composition

BY MARK FARRINGTON

When I decided to teach note-taking in my linked English 101 course, I didn't know what to expect. I'd taught close reading before, of literary texts, persuasive articles, even textbooks, and close reading requires that students take notes. But my freshman composition course is linked to Psychology 100, a lecture course with over 300 students which covers mostly factual material . They have a textbook, which they can reread and highlight and write in (although many are surprised when I tell them they not only can, but also should, do this). But the most important notes they take come from the forty or so 50-minute lectures that fill (along with tests) virtually all the time they spend in class.

It would be hard for any professor to critically evaluate notes a student took on that professor's own lecture. Teaching a linked course gives me another context, since all 44 students in my two sections of English 101 are among those 300 enrolled in the same section of Psychology 100. So I announced in my classes that we were going to study note-taking. I selected a Psych 100 lecture and told them they were required to attend that lecture, and they had to take notes. I would be attending the lecture, too, I added, and would take my own notes. Then, in the English class immediately following the Psych class, we would look at the notes each of us had taken.

My plan wasn't to hold up my model as the "correct" notes for the class and show each of them where they'd gone wrong. I was genuinely curious to see how their notes would compare to mine, what differences might arise, and why. I participated so that we would all have the same experience, and the same frame of reference. In showing them my notes, I could explain why I had taken them a certain way, or why I had chosen to take down one thing and not another, or what kind of note-making I had done in response to the note-taking. And just as I could explain why I made certain choices to them, they could explain their choices to me.

Many students, even a few of the best ones, had written down virtually every word the professor said, in complete sentences; one girl had 13 pages of notes…

Before the Psych class, I checked the Psych 100 syllabus, found the pages in the text that most closely related to the lecture, and read them all. This seemed like such an obvious first step to me that I never even thought to mention it to the class.

The subject of the lecture was memory. The professor used Power Point slides, and most of the terms I recognized from the reading. I took down these terms anyway, along with the definitions the professor gave. I also took down things like names and dates that I might have encountered in the text but did not recall.

This was my first experience taking notes in a lecture in more than twenty years. I discovered that it did not seem unlike reading an article for the second time, except it was my ear, not my eye, that was seeking out the "important" information, and skimming the rest. Then, rather than underlining printed words, my pen had to write those words in my notes, but again, the process of listening critically to extract what is important felt remarkably similar to the process of reading critically to do the same thing.

Because most of the information a.) was familiar to me and b.) seemed to be common sense, I also had the opportunity to engage in note-making along with my note-taking. When the professor gave a definition, I wrote down her words. Then I wrote the definition again in my own words. (If I couldn't rewrite the definition quickly, I decided I must not really understand the term.) At other points, I was able to make connections between information given and my own experiences, or jot down some of my own examples. At one point, after writing the professor's words that "short-term memory can hold no more than nine digits at one time; i.e. zip codes and social security numbers," I wrote, off to the side, "That's why I get mad when some company gives me an account number with 15 digits and no dashes, and then expects me to write it on my checks."

In English class, I made some interesting discoveries. Many students, even a few of the best ones, had written down virtually every word the professor said, in complete sentences; one girl had 13 pages of notes (mine had totaled about a page and a half). "I have to write down everything," she explained when I asked her why. "If I don't, then she might say something I'll miss."

"What will you do," I asked, "when it comes time to study your notes for the test?"

"I'll read through them all and highlight everything that's important," she replied.

"So you'll take notes on your notes?"

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"I guess so," she replied, though I don't think she'd ever thought of it in that way before.

How much information to take down turned out to be one of the key decisions each student made, whether consciously or not. Some students who'd written several more pages of notes than I did had left out what I believed was key information. Only a handful had written the date on their notes, and almost no one—not even the student with 13 pages—had taken down information about the upcoming test that the professor had given in response to a question asked by a student near the front.

How students laid out their notes proved important, too. Some used a traditional outline form, while others preferred something closer to a map. In both cases, the layout of the notes helped key terms stand out as important and showed how related concepts were related. But some students wrote their notes in paragraphs, so that every word looked exactly as important as every other word, while one student's handwriting was so illegible I refuse to believe even he will be able to decipher what he's written a month from now.

Perhaps the greatest difference I noticed between my notes and my students' was the fact that almost nowhere did any student engage in note-making. Students did not rewrite definitions in their own words (in fact, at times, when I asked students to explain in their own words a definition they'd written in their notes, many couldn't do it.) There were no comments written, no connections made, no questions asked. "We don't have time," several students explained. "We're too busy copying things down to

think about them. Besides," they complained, "the professor goes too fast."

I offered suggestions for ways they might bring note-making into the process. Rewrite definitions in their own words. Try to come up with at least one example in addition to the examples the professor or the book provide. Do a 2- or 3-minute freewriting right after the lecture on anything that strikes them from the lecture. Find ways to relate what they are learning to the rest of their life (A big reason many students first become interested in psychology, I believe, is because it so readily connects to one's life.)

Finally, I got around to the question I probably should have asked first: "How many read the text before the lecture?" First we had to get through the jokers who asked, "You mean who has read some part of the text at some time before this lecture?" Then I got the truth: nearly three-fourths of them had not.

I thought a lot about what that meant. I didn't take it as an indictment of Psychology, as most of them had probably not read our English textbook either. But I could rectify that by giving quizzes on the reading, or requiring them to write logs, or in other ways. I was not their babysitter, especially when they left my class. My job, I assured myself, was not to make sure they read their Psychology text.

But what was my job?

I decided it was to help students understand possibilities. I wanted them to know what tools are available, and what practices exist, for helping them to succeed. I could show them the experience; what they took from it, or if they chose to repeat it—those things were up to them.

First I decided to learn about their experience. I went to another Psych lecture and took notes. This time I purposely did not

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read the text beforehand. In the lecture, I found myself scribbling furiously to keep up, writing practically everything the professor said, trying to copy all the diagrams that appeared on the screen. My notes were messy and poorly ordered. I took five times more notes than I had the first time, and I had absolutely no time to apply any of the concepts being mentioned because I was too busy copying down their basic meanings. My students were right all along, I grumbled. The professor goes too fast! I shared my experience with my students. I actually felt like commending some of the ones who had been diligently going to every lecture, taking copious notes, while not yet having read past Chapter 1 in the text. Then I selected one more lecture for them to go to. "When you come to English class the day before the lecture," I told them, "bring your Psychology books."

That day in English class, we read. I asked them to open the textbook to the beginning of the section the lecture was scheduled to cover and start reading. I told them it didn't matter if that was a hundred pages beyond where they'd last stopped reading; I wanted everyone in class to attend at least one Psych lecture knowing what it was like to read the text first. (Later, when I discovered how many students were even more than a hundred pages behind in the reading, I began recommending that they skip those pages and starting that day, try to keep up. "You can make up those missed pages later," I told them. "But you won't be able to make up the experience of going to lectures having read the text first.")

Lately I've been learning more about how to teach note-taking and note-making, and I'm particularly looking for ways to help students improve their note-making skills. (I'm pondering, for instance, requiring students to use a dual-entry learning log in their Psych 100 lectures, which I would then look over.) But for now, I'm pleased with the results I've seen from this first-time effort. More of my students are reading the text before they go to class, and even those who don't are aware that it would help them and seem more inclined to accept responsibility when they do poorly on tests.

I hope their Psychology professor will be as pleased. In English class the other day, I overheard two students complaining about her. "That's practically all she ever covers," one student said. "Exactly what's in the book, what you've already read."

"I know," the other agreed. "I can't believe she goes so slow."

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Imaginary Gardens and Real Issues

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problematic teachers must be the implementers of the new ideas. In this paradox East reflects education reform nationally over the last thirty years. A major study of federal reform efforts in the 1960's, 70's, and 80's identified as a "core irony" the fact that federal policies were based on "a fundamental mistrust of the judgement and knowledge of educators, but successful implementation of those reforms relies on those very educators" (Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988).

Efforts to improve language arts over the last 20 years — the waves in the wave theory— represent a particular instance of change efforts thwarted by fragmentation, overload, and mistrust of the judgement and knowledge of teachers. Writing process pedagogy can be seen as the paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. As the process gospel spread rapidly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, language arts curricula mandated process steps, peer response, and the author's chair. But without high-quality, sustained professional development for the teachers on the receiving end of these mandates, little systemic change resulted (Applebee, 1984; Graves, 1984).

Succeeding innovations—literature-based reading, "big books," whole language, the reader's workshop, DISTAR, and others—met a similar fate. New ideas backed by strong research evidence were effectively adopted by small numbers of teachers, but their widespread implementation existed in name rather than in fact. A recent review of these efforts reached this conclusion:

> *It's clearly much easier to change the top half of the system than the bottom half. 'Reform' efforts are underway in every state in the country. It is less clear that these reform efforts have had any effect at the classroom level... At best, we can argue that the "sys-*

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temic" reform may set the stage for innovations in practice, but does not assure them." (Hoffman, 1998)

The lesson here seems clear. Successful, research-tested techniques for improving language arts instruction have been developed. It is easy to find outstanding individual classrooms and teacher exemplars of success for any given technique, and these exemplars are publicized widely by advocates of a particular reform. But no reform has achieved success that could be termed widespread, and in too many cases the original spirit and intent of the techniques has been undermined by other factors. Seen from this perspective, the "eclectic" pedagogy found at East is more normative than unusual.

Batton and Vereline's survey of literacy practices made clear that the majority of the student's day, no matter what grade level, was being spent in activities related to reading and writing. And yet test scores continued to decline.

For example, Barbara Batton and Linda Vereline (1995) of the New York City Writing Project conducted an intensive analysis of literacy instruction in a 1,200 student New York City elementary school designated for "corrective action" due to low test scores.

They found a school that was 100 years old and badly overcrowded, working at 125% of student capacity and with a long waiting list for kindergarten placement. Students new to the United States were a regular part of the student population, and each grade from K-5 had three bilingual classes.

A large number of "exemplary" literacy practices were in use, including twenty-minute blocks of silent reading time directly after lunch; ninety-minute literacy periods every day for monolingual and bilingual students; homogenous reading groups in grades 2, 3, and 4; specific reading assessments for group placement; remedial reading initiatives; classroom libraries; and a "reading buddies" program across grades. Writing practices included book making and publishing; a school-wide writing-across-the-curriculum program; and daily journal writing. Professional development for all teachers was being provided by the publisher of the school's new basal series, and mandatory ESL workshops for monolingual teachers were being given by an outside consultant.

Batton and Vereline's survey of literacy practices made clear that the majority of the student's day, no matter what grade level, was being spent in activities related to reading and writing. And yet test scores continued to decline. This caused them to take a deeper look at the educational context in the building, a look that uncovered hidden sources of difficulty. These included a "culture of mistrust" created by years of scrutiny linked to constantly changing district mandates, which in their report to the district Batton described in these terms:

This steady diet of prescribed packaged kits and history of continually-replaced mandated programs across the curriculum for which staff is then given 'training' has sent a message of mistrust for teachers as independently capable and competent educators and has contributed to undermining teachers from taking responsibility for their own practice.

Batton and Vereline also found that though there were many literacy activities, the definition of literacy embraced by the school was a narrow one that relied heavily on the constructs in the basal series. In addition, they noted that the school was having limited success reaching out to parents, that there was a widespread perception of inequity in distribution of materials on the part of bilingual staff, and that teachers were very concerned about the absence of school-wide art, music, and movement programs. Taken together with the "culture of mistrust," these factors neutralized or outweighed the effects of the many "exemplary practices" which were in use daily in the school.

Confident that I now have a sense of the "local context" at East as well as a grasp of relevant national patterns in systemic and language arts reform, I begin to construct the recommendations I will give to Alice and Barbara on Monday.

III. Creating Exemplary Contexts for Mandated Systemic Change

My thinking starts with the context East shares with hundreds of other urban schools struggling to change. These schools are widely perceived by the voters and elected officials who fund them to be not

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just failing but incapable of reforming themselves. Examples abound: Chicago's schools are currently run by Mayor Richard Daley's budget director, a man with no background in either teaching or school administration; Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan has called his city's schools "a total failure"; in New York, Mayor Rudy Giuliani has been advocating a voucher system of the type that has already been adopted in Milwaukee.

Because these schools are perceived as failing, their instructional agenda is heavily influenced by ideas and structures from the outside: mandated curricula, high stakes tests, and systemic reforms embodied in "exemplary programs" bringing reform dollars.

To date there is little evidence that these curricular and systemic reforms have achieved widespread success (Anderson, 1998; Christensen, 1998; Elmore, 1996; Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 1996; Fullan and Miles, 1992; Hoffman, 1998; Miller, 1996; Muncey and McQuillan, 1993; Tyack and Tobin, 1994). In the case of exemplary programs, much of the evidence for success has been gathered by the programs themselves and is open to question (Pogrow, 1998).

Analyses of existing reforms lead to two realizations. The first is that limited, short-term interventions are bound to fail because "the problems addressed by current state-driven reforms or change agent programs are not acute; they are chronic" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 15). The second is that success ultimately depends not on the externally-generated exemplary program or curricular innovation, but on the internal context—the school itself. Well-designed reform programs try to account for this by devoting attention to the "fit" between program and school or the balance between fidelity to "exemplary" techniques and adaptation to local needs (Chenoweth, 1992). But this still leaves the emphasis on the change program, not on the school.

At the moment, policymakers, reformers and school systems typically proceed as if adoption of exemplary programs and development of strong local contexts are non-conflicting goals, complementary parts of an overall school improvement strategy. From what I have seen, this is a naïve assumption. The experience of urban teachers and principals across the country is often that of development *versus* adoption, not the development *through* adoption that is assumed to be the norm. From their point of view, systemic reform is often an "imaginary garden" filled with "real toads" like the following:

1. Top-down and outside-in reforms in curriculum and staff development from the 1960s to the 1990s achieved individual successes, but produced little evidence of widespread, lasting change, whether measured on their own terms (fidelity of adaptation) or the school's (improved performance by students and teachers). There are few reasons to believe the current wave of exemplary programs and systemic reforms will achieve a different fate, for few of these programs address the major stumbling block to such reform— they de-value teacher knowledge and expertise by starting from the assumption that the knowledge and commitment necessary for change reside chiefly *outside* the school, in the university, policy center, or private consulting group sponsoring the exemplary program.

...few (reform) programs address the major stumbling block to such reform— they de-value teacher knowledge and expertise by starting from the assumption that the knowledge and commitment necessary for change reside chiefly outside the school, in the university, policy center, or private consulting group sponsoring the exemplary program.

2. Momentum for reform often comes from disinterested advocates seeking only to improve education. But in an educational system like ours, based in state and local political structures, motives are mixed. Reform can be driven by powerful elected officials responding to the short-term election cycle rather than the long-term cycle we know is necessary for renewal; or by a beleaguered superintendent's need to *do something right now,* to respond to disastrous test scores; or by persuasive, high-profile academics seeking prestige or profits through national adoption of their reform plans; or by a principal's need to show the superintendent he is a "team player" by adopting a reform favored by

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central office. Or all of these motives may operate at once to create a political, strategic, and educational maelstrom that takes its toll on classroom instruction as well as on teacher and principal morale.

It is important to recognize that devaluing teachers' potential for contributing to reform is not a problem particular to urban education or to the current wave of reform. In seeking to answer the question of why the organizational forms that govern instruction have persisted while challenges to them have been "mostly evanescent," Tyack and Tobin (1994) reviewed fifty years of historical evidence and drew this conclusion: "To bring about improvement at the heart of education— classroom instruction...—has proven to be the most difficult kind of reform, and it will result in the future more from internal changes created by the knowledge and expertise of teachers than from the decisions of external policymakers" (p. 135).

After considering these "real toads," the starting point for my recommendations to Alice and Barbara will be this: East's primary emphasis should be placed not on the outside element, the *exemplary program*, but on the internal task, making East an *exemplary context* for learning. This is a problematic recommendation from some perspectives, because it implies that the professionals who work in the school are to a large degree intelligent, competent, and caring enough to begin addressing their own problems, a proposition that, given the current state of urban schools, seems to many to be untrue on its face.

How does East go about becoming an exemplary context? The first step is to focus on the long-term success of the school and the long-term needs of its teachers, students and parents, and then ask how mandated reforms can help the school get to where it needs to go. This is the opposite of what currently happens in many schools, where the school is felt to be adrift and directionless and outside mandates and change programs are seen as filling a vacuum of leadership and confidence.

Four areas, sustained over time, can provide common direction and respect for differences, enabling Barbara, Jackie, Francisco, Phyllis, and the rest of East's staff to move forward together to implement an effective school-wide language arts plan. These approaches can be undertaken singly or as complementary parts of an overall plan. They are compatible with both state curriculum initiatives and exemplary reform programs.

The *first* is regular discussion of a range of real work from East students. One formal way to start this process is to create a grade-wide writing sample, typically at a grade in which students are also taking a state or city-wide test tied to the new curriculum, and to conduct a modified holistic scoring session with the faculty using this sample. In this process, teachers rate and respond to anonymous, grade-wide samples of best, worst, and average student writing on a given topic, and then discus them and identify characteristics of low, middle, and high performing writers in that grade. In such a discussion, Barbara, Jackie, Francisco, and Phyllis would all be commenting on the same pieces of writing, and both the commonalities and differences in their approaches to language would quickly become apparent. This, in turn, would provide grounds for further discussion as the year went on, discussion that could also be grounded in student artifacts from other grades and in areas besides writing. This is especially possible if teachers in the building already keep portfolios of such student artifacts, or agree to begin keeping them for this purpose. An important outcome of such discussions may be creation of a school-wide reading and writing philosophy that is simple, jointly created, and agreed on by *all* the faculty. The philosophy can then be posted in the principal's office, at the entrance to the school, and in every teacher's room, as well as translated into appropriate languages and sent home to parents with an explanatory letter.

The *second* is in-depth analysis, again on a regular basis and in a group, of the learning patterns of individual students using a simple but formal process which insures that this is more than just gossiping or complaining about students. One such process is the "descriptive review" developed by the Prospect School in Vermont, and now used by schools in other parts of the country; another is a reflective case study or case story, a technique now used regularly in educational leadership training (A good example and discussion of a descriptive review in an urban elementary school can be found in Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993; for descriptions of reflective case studies and "case stories" see Ackerman et. al., 1996; Thornber and Williams, 1996). Whatever process is used, it must insure confidentiality, be respectful of students, show students' strengths as well as weaknesses, and invite multiple perspectives on and interpretations of students'

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behavior and learning styles. This is particularly true in the multi-racial, multi-lingual contexts of many urban schools.

The *third* is regular reflective writing by teachers, and sharing of that writing with colleagues. Writing and sharing starts group discussions on common ground, lets teachers reflect on their own processes as language learners, and leads naturally to further discussions about teaching language arts. It can also be combined with other methods mentioned: reviews of student work or looks at individual students can provide the ground for reflective writing which can then be shared and responded to, moving program planning along in a grounded way. Such writing can also take for its subject the process of using state curriculum frameworks, the impact of mandated high-stakes testing on students, teachers, and parents, or reflections on the implementation process of an exemplary program (see McEntee, 1998; Hole and McEntee, 1999).

The *fourth* is school-based teacher research, and discussion of data produced by such research, to check on progress of school-wide initiatives or promote inquiry approaches to teaching. Variations of this technique—teacher research, action research, and practitioner inquiry are three frequently used labels— have been growing rapidly in schools, and they can undergird long term change in schools like East, because they unlock both power and positive energy that can fuel connections across disciplines or teaching philosophies (see Check, 1997; Calhoun, 1994).

These four strategies—looking closely at student work, in-depth group analysis of

student learning issues using a formal process, regular reflective writing, and school-based research— are effective and doable, and in the real world are often found in various combinations adapted to what a school views as its greatest needs.

I know of examples across the NWP network and outside it, and I am sure there are many examples I know nothing of. Here, to demonstrate some ways these techniques work in the real world, I will mention only those I know best because I have participated in or observed them.

- In Boston, the school system's Center For Leadership Development will fund forty-six school-based inquiry groups this year and many of them, in response to a system-wide priority, are looking closely at student work. This is the fourth year of the inquiry group program, and Boston Writing Project (BWP) teacher consultants have provided much of the teacher expertise on which the program is based. BWP member Steve Gordon has been a Lead Teacher with the program since its inception and in a recent Inquiry Group newsletter wrote of his belief in the program and the need to take it to a higher level:

I am convinced of the necessity of this work, its value to teachers, and the seriousness of teacher commitment. My big question is: what is the identity of the Inquiry Group Program as an institution in Boston's professional development plans? What is its place in building knowledge and methods that influence instruction and school culture? . . . Most of our professional development involves "training" and workshops, which are considered essential methods for sharing "best practices" although they often do not

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seem to result in enduring change. I feel a need to establish a permanent "bottom-up" methodology for professional development—to argue for inquiry groups as equally essential, a necessity rather than a luxury. (p.1)

- A Massachusetts professional development network, the Massachusetts Field Center for Teaching and Learning, has for the past four years sponsored a statewide Teachers Academy which supports school-based action research teams. Over a twelve-month period, these five-member teams identify, research, and address a school-wide change goal. Regular reflective writing by participating teachers is a formal and important element of the program. Evaluations show the program is successful both in creating change in individual teachers' beliefs and practices, and in creating school-wide change.

- In my own work with schools I have seen how a simple shift in the use of a standard reflective writing technique can open new areas of awareness for a whole school. Several years ago a BWP teacher-consultant asked me to work with her during the opening sessions of a year-long professional development series. The Boston elementary school we were working with had low test scores, high enrollment, and a student body that was highly diverse, including a majority of African-American students and bilingual programs in both Spanish and Haitian Creole. At the second after-school workshop, which included the whole faculty and the principal, we asked participants to do a piece of short, memory-based personal writing—a standard technique both of us had used many times before. This time, we added a single sentence to the directions: "Please feel free to write in whatever language you feel most comfortable." Immediately, the dynamics in the room changed. When it came time to share aloud, we encouraged those who had not written in English to read what they had written just as they had written it, and then to provide an impromptu English translation. The discussion that followed was rich and animated, and opened up in an unprecedented way major issues of language status, "correctness," pedagogy, and philosophy that had been boiling just under the surface. Some of the bilingual teachers said they had never before felt free to express themselves as professionals in their first language, and that it was a liberating experience. Others, both bilingual and regular education teachers, wondered if we were sending the wrong message, devaluing the importance of English which was, after all, the key to school success for both bilingual and monolingual children. Some teachers pointed out that the situation of those African-American children who spoke non-standard English at home was in some ways similar to the situation of the Spanish and Haitian-speaking children. Among several of the Haitian teachers, there was conflict over whether their "real" first language was Haitian Creole, an emerging language, or the traditional French in which much Haitian schooling is conducted. At the end of the time period, few wanted to leave. It had become clear to all that the beliefs revealed in this conversation were affecting teaching and learning in the school in an important, hitherto hidden way.

The read-aloud in three languages was a breakthrough moment for that workshop series; it acted like a lightning bolt suddenly illuminating the true tension and complexity inherent in literacy learning in the school. After that moment neither teachers nor workshop leaders pretended that better reading and writing could be achieved simply by applying an appropriate selection of "best practices." Something far deeper and more personal was at stake. By June, the school had made substantial progress in defining for itself its own shared philosophy of writing, based on those things the whole staff could agree on, and individual teachers and clusters of teachers had shared and learned new techniques, analyzed student work and their own teaching, and made significant change in their classroom approaches to literacy.

The philosophy statement, when viewed from the outside, contained little that was surprising —writing was a process, writing should be done regularly and in a variety of forms at all grade levels, there are many different "correct" techniques for teaching writing, parents should be regularly informed both of writing lessons and of why the lessons were designed as they were, improved literacy in the first language strengthened English language learning, all the school's students had the right to regular instruction in English fluency and usage—its importance was that it embodied a set of negotiations around differing and strongly-held beliefs that had started the teachers and principal on the road to school-wide change—to becoming not a

replication site of a national exemplar, but their own "exemplary context."

With these three examples in mind, I now feel ready to meet with Alice and Barbara, but I'm apprehensive. The recommendations I'm making are not easy to implement and may not be favored by the district superintendent because they take too long and don't achieve directly measurable student results. This puts Alice in a difficult position, and without Alice's support my recommendations will go nowhere. East is already suffering from fragmentation and overload: both principal and teachers are stretched for time by the extra meetings required for the mandated curriculum reforms and the exemplary program. On the other hand, my visits with Jackie, Phyllis, Francisco, and the regular education teachers have given Alice, Barbara, and me a way to talk about the dirty little secret of mandated whole school change—before you can make a school *change* you first have to make it *whole*. Wholeness comes from dealing, on the school's own terms, with internal fragmentation and internal goal-setting. Francisco, Phyllis, Jackie, and Barbara must have ways to talk to each other not just about what they do, but about why they do it. And all four must be able to talk as professionals to Alice, and she to them. The externally-generated reforms can be either an obstacle or an opportunity, depending on whether East can achieve a core wholeness and identity as a school that is larger and more central than the external change forces. If it can, then outside reforms may bring additional resources, opportunities for professional development, and links to external networks that can enrich East. But if mandated external solutions take the place of internal coherence, initiative, and identity, then the battle for reform is already lost. The core focus must not be on the *exemplary program*, but on how to make East an *exemplary context* for teaching and learning, in the long term and largely with the personnel already in place. I look forward to Monday's meeting with excitement, hope, and a little fear.

Conclusion

At this outset of this essay I argued that NWP sites are well-positioned to assist urban schools attempting reform, and that increased federal funding brings increased opportunity but also presents a dilemma: how can a project based on "teachers-teaching-teachers" make a place for itself in a reform movement that routinely treats urban teachers as part of the problem, not part of the solution?

I argued that we must shift the focus of collaboration from *exemplary programs* to the creation of *exemplary contexts*, the set of conditions that will allow a particular school with a unique history and faculty to integrate outside interventions into a process of sustainable success on its own terms.

To focus on exemplary contexts we must clarify our thinking about change. Rather than uncritically accepting the change process often promoted by national reform advocates, "scaling up" exemplars for reproduction across the country, we must advocate for "scaling down," which Joseph P. McDonald defines as "working on the real problems of redesign at the actual sites, where new beliefs must be adopted, new structures and cultures worked out, and new ways imagined..." (p. 245).

The locally-based NWP network is an ideal vehicle for helping urban schools build exemplary contexts, because it is already both scaled-down and relevant. McDonald specifically cites the NWP's success in curriculum reform, but reminds us that changing a school is "a much bigger and more ambiguous undertaking than the redesign of writing instruction." He recognizes that the Writing Project holds great promise because it uses an approach that "takes teachers' actual contexts seriously, that nonetheless introduces teachers to outside areas, that offers them an appealing new identity rooted in new competencies, and that manages not only to forgive but to encourage and support learning on the job" (p. 248).

The locally-based NWP network is an ideal vehicle for helping urban schools build exemplary contexts, because it is already both scaled-down and relevant.

What does this mean for Writing Project directors, co-directors, and teacher consultants? As a local site director who has also been involved in national initiatives, I am certain of three things about our collective work: because literacy lies at the heart of student achievement and extends to every subject area, Writing Projects reach whole schools. Because we promote teacher-conducted professional development and practitioner research, we develop leadership. Because we provide summer institute experiences that are often transforming, we understand change.

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Now we must thoughtfully take the next step. We must work with each other across the NWP network as well as with practitioners like Alice, Barbara, Jackie, Francisco, and Phyllis to explore the connection between improved literacy instruction and an improved school. For some sites, this may involve taking a look at how inservice is provided, for others it may involve collaboration with reform groups.

There is much knowledge to share in our network. NWP's Project Outreach sites have developed processes to help sites look at their own work. The New York City and Philadelphia sites are deeply engaged in collaboration with reform groups through the Students at the Center Project. The Urban Sites Network and English Language Learner Network provide forums for new learning and for sharing what we have learned. Our challenge, particularly in urban areas, is to develop new forms of partnership with schools and other collaborators while maintaining the core of what we know and do as Writing Projects: that teacher knowledge and commitment lie at the heart of successful change, that individuals change systems as much as systems change individuals, and that writing and learning walk hand in hand.

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Books

One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards

BY SUSAN OHANIAN

Defending Access: A Critique of Higher Education

BY TOM FOX

REVIEWED BY JAYNE MARLINK

A memory from first grade stays with me. My mother, an elementary school teacher, was tutoring Tim, an eighth grade student who was having problems with his reading. I eavesdropped on their sessions frequently because I couldn't figure out why Tim was struggling so much with the words in the reader. One day I just had to know, and I asked my mom why Tim, who was so much older than I was, could not read the words in a book that I could read so easily. My mother took great care to explain to me how Tim was smart with electricity and woodworking, and I was smart with words. She pointed out the times Tim had helped out my father with electronic repairs around the house. She asked me if I could have helped. That was the first of many times my mother told me, "There are many ways to be smart. It just takes more time to see some of the ways, and some people won't take the time."

I have never forgotten what she taught me that day. This memory has everything to do with how I see students, as smart and capable, and how I see teaching, as discovering the many ways students demonstrate their learning. This memory also has a great deal to do with my reactions to the two books that are the subject of this review. Both books are, at least in part, about the ways people forget, in this standards-driven environment, that there are many ways to be smart.

Susan Ohanian's polemic, *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards*, is a wide-ranging discussion of the thorny issues around standards. She considers standards and standards documents across many disciplines from many states, educational policy and policymakers, standardized tests and standards-driven accountability. The writing is smart and funny, acerbic at times and acidic at others. The titles and subtitles of chapters preview the author's pointed style: "Standard Timetables for Nonstandard Kids"; "Standard Fare: The Rich Get Richer, the Poor Get Ignored"; and "Who Put *Education Week* in Charge of the World?"

In the introduction, Ohanian writes that it is her "moral duty to offer a counterargument to people who would try to streamline, sanitize, and standardize education" (ix). "Standardistos," the term coined by Ohanian to describe such people, are those who put students " on a conveyor belt to the future" (19). In an interview for the April 1999 issue of *Curriculum Administrator*, Ohanian further describes Standardistos as the kind of policymakers who don't see teachers, principals, or students, who "keep their eye only on the government's pot of Goals 2000 gold." Ohanian challenges these policy makers "who know our children by their number-two pencils." She "turns pedagogy into narratives" (3) about teachers and students and their encounters with the absurdities found in some of the standards documents developed in response to Goals 2000.

Many of the most powerful stories are about her students and what they achieve— Carol, a foster child, who had to learn to smile before she could learn to read; Jack, who learned his language skills playing Scrabble against himself; and Billy, who ate his pencils to avoid filling in phonics worksheets but scored 100 percent on the Stanford reading test. Ohanian's point: these students could never have been taught on an assembly line, but they learned.

Ohanian draws on her wit and indignation to deftly skewer wrong-headed policy makers, but her own solutions come across as pretty fuzzy. She likes to remind us of truisms. For instance, we'd be better off if we showed compassion for our students. Instead, I wanted some specific suggestions about how, for instance, to "set minimum standards for making sure our nation's children are cared for" (150). On the whole, however, it is difficult to ignore Ohanian's assessment that for teachers to just wait for the pendulum to swing back "is to condemn thousands of students to the academic refuse bin," and that it is "morally wrong and practically nonsensical to throw our students away" (x). One reason, I think, that Ohanian's book resonates with so many teachers in public schools is that her stories about students echo their own.

I connected with Ohanian's book because of the stories. However, I learned more from Tom Fox's book, *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education* because it brought back so many memories of my students—Andre, Xue, Trang, Angelica—and their struggles in preparing for the work of college. Because I saw my

Review: One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards, and Defending Access: A Critique of Higher Education

students in Fox's book, I was taken by his reminders to remember the particular challenges urban and second-language students face. "Often these refrains of falling standards implicitly or explicitly refer to immigrant students or students of color whose difference—cultural and/or linguistic—is more at issue than their performance" (iv).

To analyze how that happens, Fox "builds a critique of standards in higher education by demonstrating how they have been—and still are — used less as a way of raising expectations for students than as a means of excluding students new to higher education" (iv). He gives us a historical look at standards and access in higher education and then analyzes what that has meant for curriculum and teaching. He then concludes the book with a lengthy section concentrating on the ways writing programs and writing teachers can work for access. Though the book focuses on the issue of standards and access in higher education, I readily made connections to my experience in K-12 schools.

It would be a mistake, however, to think Fox is arguing against teaching with high expectations for all students. Early in the book he asserts:

> *It is impossible to teach without standards, and teaching without challenging standards is usually bad teaching.*
>
> *The distinction I want to make is between the standards a teacher holds, which develop out of and are modified by interactions in context, and bureaucratic standards that almost always emerge out of a context of crisis.* (10)

Fox reminds me that excellent teachers hold high standards and that those standards are very context- and student-specific.

Fox also urges me to question a long-held belief of mine: preparing students for college reading and writing opens the doors to higher education. For Fox, such a belief is a bit simplistic and idealistic. "If we tell ourselves and our students that they will achieve access if they master writing standards, we are obscuring and underestimating the powerful forces of racism, elitism, and heterosexism that continue to operate despite the students' mastery of standards" (6). Fox instead offers his own writing standards and then suggests classroom practices that offer students writing opportunities to explore, critique, interrogate, and resist "the social forces that prevent access" (92) so that "learning to write becomes a means of access" (111).

What I so appreciate is that Fox describes these teaching practices in his context and in light of his students. He stitches the chapters and the arguments together with vignettes about his students in basic writing courses and examples of their writing. The students' writing gives voice to their challenges, their persistence, and above all, their intelligence: Leon, who writes to reflect on and analyze the forces he encountered growing up in the communities of Compton and Hawthorne, California; and Tina, who researches the literary and intellectual traditions of African-American women and claims a place within those traditions. As Fox argues, the achievements of these students are both academic and intellectual, and they are also "examples of student critical writing, the conscious and careful actions of intellectual students designed to resist the limiting and damaging practices that reduce the numbers of students of color in the university" (109). To see Fox's or my students only in terms of the writing skills they need to improve often means forgetting the analytic, academic talents they already have in place.

These students stay with me, and there is a section of Fox's introduction that also stays with me. "We suffer from a destructive forgetfulness. While an event such as the Los Angeles riots may provoke a storm of concern for the state of urban education and the broken promises of justice, this storm is a summer shower, briefly drenching the soil, but not ending the drought" (v).

Reminders of the damage forgetting can do brings me back to remembering and the ways writing can help us remember. Toward the end of her book, Ohanian challenges us to tell our classroom stories about the students who are too often forgotten. Fox reminds us to provide the same opportunities for students to write their stories and critiques. Though these stories may not have persuasive value for everyone, at the very least they begin to contextualize the debate over standards and standards-based reform. Alongside Ohanian's and Fox's books, I would like to see a flood of classroom stories and student writing that illustrates the countless ways our students are smart and the innumerable ways excellent teachers foster the achievement of all of those students. There are so very many ways to be smart.

Jayne Marlink is associate director of the National Writing Project.

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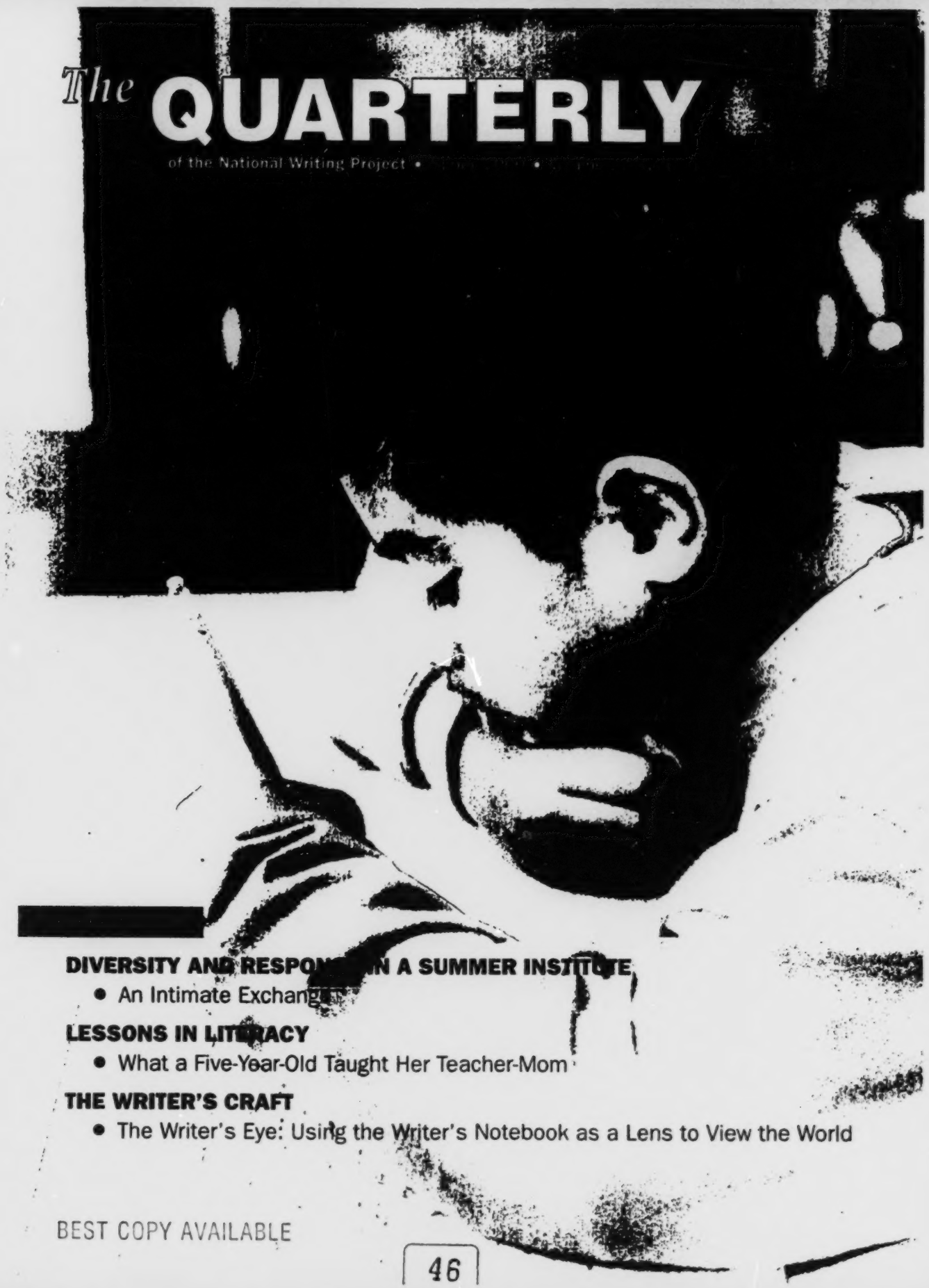

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An Intimate Exchange: First Voice

BY ELLEN NEWBERRY

Ellen Newberry

Writing response groups bring people together in dramatic and challenging ways. The following exchange between two response group members took place at Central California Writing Project's 1999 Summer Institute. Ellen Newberry and Terri Frase, two teachers who believed they shared little in common, became colleagues, allies, and friends through the special chemistry of the summer institute response group. Their conversation illustrates how participants with diverse backgrounds can learn from one another about writing, about each other, and, perhaps unexpectedly, about themselves.

—The Editors

Here I was, brazenly coming out as a lesbian on the very first day of the writing project. Would you be open to hearing my voice, my experience?

Dear Terri,

I'll admit it — when I first learned that we had, by chance, been assigned to the same response group, I made some quick assumptions. It will never work, I thought. It was the first day of the Central California Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute, the day we read pieces of our own writing to introduce ourselves. You had just finished reading about your identity as a fundamentalist Christian, shortly after I responded to the same prompt with a description of my admiration for Martina Navratilova's openness as a lesbian. We represented two groups that historically have clashed. And we were supposed to share an experience as intimate as a writing group?

My assumptions were not out of the blue; my experiences with fundamentalist Christians had generally been unpleasant. I'd been called names, been informed that in order to avoid hell's heat I must change my evil ways. I'd read statements from Christian leaders that my kind is at the root of all the world's ills, from epidemics to famine, that we are a threat to children and the family, that AIDS is simply payback for all our flawed actions. On the first day of the summer institute, of course, you didn't say any of these things, but as you read your piece I had a hard time keeping those other voices out of my head. I'm sure you and others in the group experienced a similar inner dialogue as you heard my piece. Here I was, brazenly coming out as a lesbian on the very first day of the writing project. How many assumptions did I inspire?

It wasn't as if we would just be joined in the larger writing project experience, either. In our smaller response group, we were about to share an activity that can be intimidating in the best of circumstances. My apprehension was fueled by memories of writing groups in which trust had never been developed or had been broken, in which people's assumptions about lesbians had silenced my pen. Would I be able to write in your presence? Would you be open to hearing my voice, my experience? Of course, I should have been asking myself, as well, whether I would be open to hearing your experience, your voice. But in that humanly egocentric way, I left those thoughts lingering quietly on the outskirts of my mind.

Midway through the second week, I came across a passage you had written in our response group's journal about your discomfort with some of the larger group's conversations and the frequent sexual reference. When you described your sense of isolation and your inner debate over whether to speak up or remain silent, your words rang true for me with startling force. How often had I had the same internal conversation? Should I represent all gays

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An Intimate Exchange: Second Voice

BY TERRI FRASE

I felt like your homosexuality was much more widely accepted and easily discussed than my Christianity would be. These thoughts spiraled into a big question for me: Does a Christian belong in public education?

Dear Ellen,

As soon as you started reading your paper, I knew where it was going. Immediately I became even more nervous about sharing my piece. The first day of a four-week institute — what will this group of thirty teachers from around the central coast think of me? Are you going to think I'm like the fundamentalist Christians you've seen out in the public, bombing abortion clinics and holding Scripture-endorsed signs at the Gay Pride Parade that say, "God hates fags— Leviticus 10:13"? How can I, one person, hope to break down hundreds of years' worth of stereotypes in four weeks?

The prompt for this life-changing piece of work was simple: Write a piece of prose or poetry on something you care about very deeply. How could I write about Jesus? How could I write about anything else without mentioning Jesus? After all, my life is devoted to following Him. But how could I go to a room full of professionals, teachers, at UC Santa Cruz, a much more liberal university than I went to, and confess this? And if I didn't confess, how could I be true to myself? Could I keep quiet about the passion that gives me a reason to live? Maybe in my classroom, but not in my personal writing.

So I made the bold move. Waiting until almost the last person had shared (which is so unlike me), I spoke up. Shaking nervously, I attempted to turn my nervousness into confidence, speaking slowly, clearly, and making eye contact with others in the room as I read about my best friend. At the end of my paper, I revealed that my best friend is Jesus Christ. Immediately after I read, we broke for lunch. I wondered if this was intentional. No one talked to me. As I left for lunch, the nervousness I felt turned into fear and questioning. I had taken a risk, revealed my soul in my writing, and felt rejected. Nevertheless, I focused on making the best of the institute, and upon returning after lunch, I discovered that the woman who would be my response group leader for the four weeks was Ellen. "God, you're funny," I prayed silently. "I'm uncomfortable. You put me in Ellen's group for a reason. Please give me the love, strength, and wisdom to represent you."

What will our response group think of me? I wondered. What do you already assume? What do you think of Christians? What horrible things have Christians said and done to you? How can I earn the right to be heard in this group? And will I be able to truly share my heart in our writing response group, or will my fear silence me? All of these questions ran through my mind as we met for the first time. After all, writing can reveal the most personal and intimate aspects of a person's life, and to be vulnerable with strangers is a risk in and of itself. Thankfully, Robin commented that she liked what I shared — that I was bold. Someone else added that you, too, were bold in what you shared, Ellen. You related that we must have had a lot of similar fears and hesitations that first day as we wrote and read out loud about such personal issues. I was amazed at your openness and sensitivity — and hoped I could come across to you and others in our group in the same way. My eyes and heart were opened to see that a unique friendship could be forming, my first friendship with a lesbian. This was the beginning of much writing and talking about hard issues from members of two minority groups that aren't known for dialogue and mutual respect.

One monumental day as you shared a piece on unique student-teacher relationships, issues of trust and confidentiality came up,

Terri Frase

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and our response group discussed whether or not you should come out to your university students. I went home that night with so many questions. I felt like your homosexuality was much more widely accepted and easily discussed than my Christianity would be. These thoughts spiraled into big questions for me: Does a Christian belong in public education? Is public education where I belong? Am I being true to myself? And how do I share the importance of my faith with students? Should I? Can I? I've been encouraged by many students and staff through written and spoken conversation. I've been told that I impact many lives, and that I am appreciated because I truly care. Yet, in my mind, even though I know I am making a difference in students' lives, I ask myself if I'm making an eternal difference. When I die, will I stand before God and explain all of the great lessons I planned and the nice, encouraging things I did and said, and will that be enough? Will I be able to say that I used all of my gifts and talents to spread the Gospel? Will He say to me, "Well done, good and faithful servant"?

I had written in our group's response journal about some of these questions. I wrote: "Sometimes I feel like the most conservative person in the room, and although diversity is good, I wonder why I'm here. What do I have to offer? I get uncomfortable when so many sexual innuendoes are made … yet I don't ever wish to shelter myself. I hope you understand that what I'm saying is not in any way asking people to change. It's just a painful admission." I wondered when I should speak out against and express my discomfort with moral issues such as this.

To this, you responded: "I am struck again by our common feelings though they stem from very different experiences. Having to admit, painfully, to feelings of discomfort, of isolation — I know those emotions too well. I respect your honesty and your willingness to write about your feelings. I hope you don't feel too isolated. Anything I can do to help?"

I never considered myself a writer before this institute, but participating in the writing project has caused me to think, grow, and reflect on who I am in a much different way. I wrote. We discussed. I rewrote. And I learned to embrace our differences in ways that only three weeks earlier seemed unimaginable.

The next morning, without my knowing how you responded in the response journal, you noticed something was bothering me and you approached me with your concern. I found it easy to talk to you as we walked that day at lunch. You were good at bringing me back to the question: "What can I, or we as a group, do to make you feel like you can be yourself?"

As with every issue we discuss at the institute, from standards to the role of technology in writing, I came up with more questions than answers. I've come to a few conclusions that have helped me identify who I am as a person, a writer, a teacher, and a contributor to society as a whole. It is my responsibility to be who I am and contribute to the mosaic of peoples around me, no matter where I am. Running away from what makes me uncomfortable only adds to the problems of misunderstanding and intolerance, fear and prejudice that plague our world. And yet, figuring out who I am in relation to those around me — finding what is essential for me to be who God has called me to be — still remains the great challenge. The best that I can do for now is to realize where I am talented and gifted, and to contribute in those areas. For now, I need to be teaching in public high school, somehow working in the community doing hands-on service, addressing racial and economic differences in our society, and working with a small group of girls to help them develop and mature spiritually.

The impact of our struggle was felt by all five of us in our group, which was a very safe place to share writing and feelings. You wrote in our response journal during the last week of the institute: "I, too, am enjoying our group. It has felt very safe from the beginning — a real blessing." Lisa's acceptance of our candor confirmed in me that we were in the midst of important conversation: "Thanks for your courage and honesty. I appreciate your voice here — you provide another perspective and also open a space for truth. Ellen, this is also true of you." I continue to wonder what a powerful effect writing response groups will have on ninth and tenth graders in my classroom when they are confronted with such challenges.

I had never considered myself a writer before this institute, but participating in the writing project has caused me to think, grow, and reflect on who I am in a much different way. I wrote. I shared my writing with our group. We discussed. We critiqued. I rewrote. And I learned to embrace our differences in ways that only three weeks earlier seemed unimaginable. If I can pass

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this experience on to students in the form of writing response groups and focus on historical issues in a more personal way, writing will become more of an extension of themselves rather than a response to one of my questions. Their thinking and writing will continue to strengthen their confidence as members of and contributors to this "real world" we call society. I think of the beginning of the year in world history, when we discuss Socrates and what it means to "know thyself" — what a springboard for written self-reflection and response group discussion! Response groups can be a safe place where students can learn about themselves and struggle through tough issues that are "taboo" in classrooms. Students can learn to think of themselves as participators in a democratic society and learn to listen and respond to various viewpoints.

Through my friendship with you, Ellen, I have learned the power a pen has to transform lives. My pen is an extension of my arm, my body, and my mind — and it has helped me sort through and communicate difficult issues. Had we not been placed in the same response group, I may never have been forced to confront my hurtful stereotypes about homosexuals or discuss them. And really, we didn't discuss them. Rather, I learned from listening to your writing that we had more in common than I would have thought. I have always been embarrassed by extremist religious groups who isolate and humiliate homosexuals as if they were the worst "sinners" in the world. While my personal convictions are my own, and they are mandates from the Bible, I have no right to invade someone else's life and thrust my personal convictions on people, especially if they are not claiming to live up to biblical standards. By loving people the way Jesus clearly loved people, regardless of belief or lifestyle, I've found that actions speak much more clearly than words when it comes to sharing my faith. So I found it easy to express myself through my writing, knowing that my response group would listen, ponder, and challenge me to rethink my perspective without expecting me to change as a person.

Terri Frase was a teacher at Gilroy High School in Gilroy, California, when she wrote this piece. She is now pursuing a career in religious education.

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and lesbians when people lapse into assumed heterosexuality? Should I speak my mind and stay true to my ideals? Or should I stay silent and avoid being seen as a stereotype? "There she goes again, always talking about her sexuality—gay this and gay that. Can't she see that this isn't about sex?" I'd heard these comments so many times before, in other, less friendly situations, and I'd always wanted to explain that being a lesbian isn't just sexuality — it's a part of me, an identity that affects every aspect of my life. And now you were expressing the same inner conflict, making me realize that, to you, Christianity isn't just a religion; it is a fundamental part of you.

The next day we discussed your journal entry, walking and talking during the lunch break. I imagined what my friends would say if I told them I had chatted about identity and silences with a fundamentalist Christian. And did you have acquaintances who would wonder why you were sharing these thoughts with a lesbian? Yet we were recounting remarkably similar stories about "coming out" in our respective ways, particularly in our teaching lives. Can we tell our coworkers? Our administrators? Neither of us tells our students outright — what are our fears? I discovered that we have a shared dilemma, for unlike most minorities, we have to choose whether or not to reveal our identities in mixed groups, as people don't automatically know this part of us just by appearances. It's a blessing in potentially dangerous situations, but also a burden at times, as we are left with a never-ending choice: Is this a safe place to be myself? What do I gain by being honest? What might I lose? I realized that this particularly affects both of us as teachers, as we talked about how we choose where we will work. Is one grade level, one school, one subject area more safe, more inviting than another? As we dipped into topics that would have amazed me a week earlier, it seemed that we might share another experience. I've long been frustrated by those who question my identity, who maintain that I could just as easily be straight. Just as I have tried to explain time and again that my sexual identity is not a choice, that it is just who I am — as much a part of me as my height or hair color — I began to realize that you see your religion as a part of your true self, an aspect that no one can ask you to ignore or change. And when you spoke of questioning your worth as a silent teacher, I was struck again that we, two members of groups that so often see nothing in common, were actually fundamentally similar in our dilemmas and decisions. I left that conversation with a changed view not just of our relationship, but of the relationships between so many groups that believe they are vastly different from their supposed enemies.

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As the summer institute went on, as we shared our writing in our group, I found that my fears that your presence would silence my pen were unfounded; in fact, I wrote more often and more openly than I had in years, sharing with you and our group my life as a lesbian in an often hostile world, and as a human being going through very human experiences. Your openness to hearing my work defied my early assumptions; while many fundamentalist Christians see gays and lesbians as problems to be solved, you seemed to hear my experiences as perfectly natural. I was left wondering whether that was difficult for you. Were you ever uncomfortable with my presence, with my writing? If you were, it did not show. And you, too, wrote about deeply personal events from your life. When you wrote a longer piece about your struggles with silencing yourself, with being true to your identity, you chose me as a safe first reader. I was honored. Though it was not a new lesson to me, this evidence of the perils of stereotypes was particularly moving, coming as it did as a challenge to some assumptions that I have rarely questioned.

So now, as a teacher of writing, I return to the classroom humbled by the power of our encounter. I am left thinking about just what I am asking my students to do when I have them read to each other in response groups. How does the cultural, economic and racial makeup of the group determine what the students will write, how far they will go in that deeper thinking that marks really strong writing? And if the situation is uncomfortable, what will they do? What are they gaining by their uneasiness?

Perhaps discomfort in a response group can be a positive quality, despite the challenge. You and I had to think deeply about our differences. Had we been in separate response groups, we might have glided through the four weeks of the summer institute at a polite distance, talking during activities but never really exploring our reactions to each other. Can our students gain the kind of revelations I experienced during our time together? Can they learn to open their hearts and their minds to one whom they realize to be very different from themselves, one with whom they first think that they have no common ground? Can writing in particular serve as a tool in prompting this soul-searching? Certainly writing was the catalyst that got us talking and searching.

In fact, it's not surprising to me that our discoveries came in the context of a writing group. Writing takes time; listening to a person read takes time — exactly the kind of time that opposing forces rarely give each other. Imagine if leaders of warring nations sat down together to write their beliefs, their experiences, their dreams, and then read directly to each other, listening for ways to make their foe's writing more clear, more powerful, more persuasive. In the act of writing, we open our minds to our own experiences, our own deepest thoughts. In the act of listening to others, we can't help but open ourselves to their feelings, and at that point they become human, just like us. When we put ourselves in other writers' shoes in an effort to help them express themselves convincingly and clearly, we have a rare opportunity to try on some unfamiliar roles, ones from which we might ordinarily shy away.

I am keenly aware now of the potential for writers and writing groups to take on the crucial problems not just of their lives, but of the world around them, to challenge the ongoing conflicts of our society, and to force us to really hear about each other's experiences. In four weeks, I learned about writing groups and their potential strength. But I also learned about listening, about truly hearing another's experience that I first resisted. That is a lesson I would be proud to have as a part of my classroom, for surely that is writing at its most powerful.

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What do you think?

"Perhaps discomfort in a response group can be a positive quality, despite the challenge," says Ellen Newberry. What do you think? How have you been challenged in your writing response group? How are your students challenged in their groups? Use this article as a springboard to self-reflection. Send us your thoughts on "An Intimate Exchange" and insights on your own experiences as a participant in or facilitator of a writing response group.

Address your letter to Quarterly Editors, National Writing Project, University of California, 615 University Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-1040, or send email to yoder@uclink.berkeley.edu with "Letter to the Editor" as your subject line. We'd love to hear from you.

On Coaching the Writer

BY JON APPLEBY

Content

The writer is sixteen, soft-spoken, shy. She has been working on the same story, her story, for the first five months of school. The tale is of a pregnancy, the death of the child in the womb, an induced childbirth, and the funeral. It is the story of a young woman trying to deal with her personal pain.

So I, English teacher, read her writing and try to help her with it. I know that the lessons of writing, paragraphing, repeated phrases, clarity, are not the first issues here. I marvel that she cares about those at all, and I wonder if she cleans her prose the way other people in mourning clean their closets or scour their kitchens.

She is not technically my student. I am one of three teachers she has shown the manuscript to. The second is her classroom English teacher, and he has given her the freedom to deal with this work until it is done. The third is also a current teacher, who is now pregnant with her first child and who is disturbed to the point of nightmares by the content.

The writer chose to change the story to a mix of first- and third-person scenes — literally distancing herself from the events of her own life by changing her voice on the page. I am struck by the sophistication and the absolute appropriateness of the technique (I think of *Steps* by Jerzy Kosinski). She and I talk about first- and third-person narratives as the immediate and the remembered, about distance in writing that controls the emotional impact of powerful stories. As we speak, I wonder about her health, and about the personal nature of all writing, no matter how "objective" it may seem.

Words are extensions of ourselves. They live as limbs, at least for a while. Across the distance of time and intervening events and ideas, our words seem less a part of ourselves, less and less sensitive.

Do we do more harm than good, with wooden assignments and "cool" comments about the texture of the prose? Are we, with our writing standards, really just trying to make our workplace impersonal and easier?

I watch this young woman write of the dangerous, possibly fetus-lethal anesthesia she had before a tonsillectomy, before she had any idea she might be pregnant. She writes of shopping for an outfit small enough to bury her lost child in. She writes of the funeral and ends with a line about having to get ready for school.

While the story hurts, I love the first- and third-person mixture. Her other (pregnant) teacher wants her to put it all in first person. I tell the writer that it's her story, her call. It's as if I am watching the creation of a memorial. I can see experience crystallizing in specific, reflected memories.

She wonders aloud what she will write about next. I know she means that she does not know what else might be as important to her. I tell her she will figure it out.

Although every young writer's story is not as compelling as this one, every writer takes an emotional risk when setting down his or her thoughts for the teacher to see. Writing here is experience itself. There is no literature as powerful as her own story. Her learning is real and authentic and unavoidably painful. I support the learning she must master by accepting her story, and yet, out of habit as deep as the Atlantic, I mark each little imperfection with a pencil mark and a suggestion.

She teaches me to beware of my objective standards, to weigh pointing out a run-on against the greater needs of the writer. She reminds me that, even as I try to have students write where their passions take them, most of my teacherly comments and notations are really spirit-killers.

Do we do more harm than good, with wooden assignments and "cool" comments about the texture of the prose? Are we, with our writing standards, really just trying to make our workplace impersonal and easier?

Imagine the task of her regular classroom teacher when he sits down to come up with her grade.

Form

Another writer, Rebecca, wrote almost nothing but poetry her freshman year, and most of the poetry sorted out her troubles with boys. She has been coded with organizational problems. In her sophomore year, we worked together in a small group setting on her writing, especially her prose. To help her organize, we made oversized outlines on poster paper and taped them to the wall. While ideas in this writer's work sometimes seem separate, even disjointed, on every page there are strong sentences that compress ideas and emotions into vivid passages.

She enjoys the literature of the Beat generation. She understands the emotional

and often non-rational transitions of Ginsberg and Kerouac, probably because they don't follow conventional ideas of diction, grammar, and story. I find those writers difficult for the very reasons that Rebecca feels a kinship.

As teachers, we often claim to admire the maverick writers, but we teach to the conventional, don't we? I know I do. I enforce the rules of connecting two sentences properly, and only two. I correct spelling. I applaud good ideas — the ideas that I understand.

In my junior English class this year, Rebecca wrote two spirited short essays, one on her philosophy and the other on art. Given her organizational problems, there is no doubt in my mind that short works are her natural form.

For her writing seminar, she did a three-page paper on Marilyn Monroe and what society did to her. The teacher made many clinical notes and summed up her comments like so: "This is all over the place and never makes an argument." Rebecca had written with passion, and with her characteristic shifting focus, her language more like poetry than prose. She came to me, near tears, to talk. She had no idea what that comment meant. Based on every objective standard held dear by the guardians of English, it was certainly accurate. Yet I knew that a year earlier, Rebecca would never have been able to produce a work of that length at all. I had a choice: to defend the teacher, or to try to recharge the injured writer.

I tried to do both. I talked with her quite honestly about her writing progress, and where I saw her in the panorama of writers and writing. I told her that her gifts far outweighed her failings for me, and that, at least in the Marilyn piece, the opposite seemed to be true for the other teacher. The difference, I told her, might be that the teacher did not know her.

This student may never deliver conventional forms, not out of obstinacy or rebelliousness. She simply thinks in her own way. She wants to write and express herself passionately, and we keep throwing up roadblocks to her passion. We assume that grammatical notions about writing come first. Rebecca signed up for writing seminar because she loves to write. After one assignment, she was discouraged enough to talk about withdrawing. Should she be ineligible because her writing is raw, flawed, and undeveloped? Or because the way she thinks makes it extremely difficult for her to go by our rules?

I mark up Rebecca's text like crazy. I am trying to clean up the surface before she has a confident hold on the greater truths: that writing is personal and requires courage.

Do we want Rebecca's work to look like everyone else's? We want her to have voice, but only in the confines of our conventions. I am as guilty of this hypocrisy as anyone. I want students to find new ways to do old things, but when a student attempts to do something different that does not feel polished and successful, when a student like Rebecca develops late as a writer, I hold that difference against her or him. I mark up the text like crazy. I am trying to clean up the surface before the writer really has a confident hold on the greater truths: that writing is personal and requires courage.

Rebecca thinks differently than I do. She writes and protests as the Beats did, against people like me. Currently she is working in an office through a school-to-careers program. Now, seeing the need, she is working on her spelling and grammatical errors.

Surface

Eugene misses a lot of classes. It took me three months to get him to talk to me about his reading and writing. English class scares the hell out of him. When I assigned the long research paper required of all juniors in our school, I finally learned that he can't get two consecutive sentences out of his head onto the page without something interfering with the process. On the surface, I am a good English teacher — I demand the appropriate work from all students in the most democratic fashion. I am the American way. I coach, offer to help, ask how the work is going. But underneath, in this case, I know I am demanding work that Eugene cannot do.

I have taken a dozen literature courses, but I know next to nothing about diagnosing reading problems. And I have yet to have a university course seriously offer to teach me how to get readers and writers who are far behind grade level to catch up. But I am stubborn, and I bull right along.

Eugene is able to tell me out loud what he means to say. He writes down the first of two thoughts accurately; then, he nearly always makes a list of three things that support his first idea. That list of things somehow melts into his second statement,

disturbing verb tenses and pronouns and all the mechanical things that make one sentence relate to the next. What comes out is very jumbled, and although he writes a page or two, the ideas are incoherent.

Eugene may very well have a learning disability. He has successfully ducked his teachers, skipped school, and kept his mouth shut as he sits in classes like mine. The process of having him coded would take most of the rest of the year. By default, I may be the best help he can get.

I make a deal with him. I'll give him an incomplete, the gift of time, if he'll meet me at least once a week. I reassure him that his ideas are fine, even excellent; it's just the translation that needs practice and work.

With Eugene I am always talking about surface. I give him small topics, coaching him on how to look at and fix each sentence before trying to connect them. Good clean sentences that hit like punches, I tell him. Forget the combinations until the jab is there. I try not to preach, but I preach all the time: how important it will be someday to say the right things well on a job application. He knows. He is very patient with me. I am just unconventional enough for Eugene to begin to trust me.

When we first began to talk, I told him openly that he was nearly impossible to get to know, and that I suspected he did not know how to do the work. "Okay, so you can't write yet," I said. "But it took me this long to really talk to you, so I can't teach. Which problem do you think will be easier to fix?"

Metaphor

Writing here is really a metaphor for all student work, for all contact between teachers and students. If work is genuine, that is, if it has purpose and meaning, then it is personal. It counts. We want to hear we do good work, not out of deep love for the work, but because we need to hear we are good ourselves.

Why as teachers are we such slaves to the surface of writing? Is it safer to talk about commas, dangling clauses, and usage than to get involved personally with the writer? There's no apparent emotion in those little flaws from *Warriner's;* the work is detailed and impersonal. But isn't the polishing of the surface a later stage in the development of a writer?

As long as we care more about the surface — the requirements, rules, and details of academic work — than about the person writing an individual work and the larger contexts and meanings, we will continue to limit our student writers. Their writing, like every act of writing, is a performance. Only when students start with something they care about, and know that they will share their writing with an audience they care about, will they begin to see the value in a polished surface for their work.

Standards

Lately I have been worried by the emphasis in the educational literature on standards for student work. While one part of my thinking applauds and says yes, we need to be clearer about what we expect from kids, another part of my brain worries that without the personalization of our teaching — finding the time to reach and work with individual students like the ones I have described — then we will still just be using standards to sort kids into categories. We will be serving the kids who have had the early advantages far better than the kids who are currently struggling with problems we often don't see. Eugene is where he is because teachers just marked him absent, wrote little notes on his writing, and failed him either for nonattendance or for his inability to adhere to Strunk and White.

My concern is not only for students who seem to have fallen behind. I could list twenty fair-to-good students who do their work mechanically and lifelessly. They ignore my little comments in the margins. In a world of slick media and pressures toward early adulthood, these students don't see the point in the details because they don't feel connected to the learning on any basic level. And if I keep making my little unread notes on the surface of their writing without dealing personally with each of them, I may as well find another profession.

Can we create standards that are open-ended enough, like the essential questions we have been using to organize and model thinking, to meet the needs of people, not just the list of skills that businesses seek? I'm skeptical. We teachers hide in the impersonal details of curriculum, don't we? It's far easier than facing the students who don't learn. The failures of those students are our failures, and that's personal.

Maybe what we really need are standards for the personalized school.

Jon Appleby teaches at Noble High School in Berwick, Maine.

Teaching in Two Worlds:

Critical Reflection and Teacher Change in the Writing Center

BY DALE JACOBS

As a novice teacher and Ph.D. student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1994, I was assigned to teach in the school's writing center, an experience that would profoundly change my approach to teaching. I had previously taught a semester of first-year composition at UNL and a year of literature at a large Canadian university. At the time, I prided myself on being a teacher who practiced what I then perceived as student-centered pedagogy — getting everyone involved in discussion, allowing students to choose the readings (albeit from an anthology that was chosen for them), and workshopping writing in peer groups. However, my so-called student-centered pedagogy was, in essence, a collection of methods, a pedagogical template overlaid on each new group of students, regardless of the individual makeup of the class. I had strategies for getting students to talk in class, but my words always remained at the center of the pedagogical relationship. I laid out ground rules for peer writing groups, but never shared my own writing. I wrote comments on student papers, but never talked *with* students about their writing. Despite the veneer of student-centered methods, I was engaged in what Paolo Freire calls "banking education," pouring knowledge into passive students. Working in the writing center radically challenged my approach to teaching and forced me to step back and examine critically my pedagogical location, methods, and philosophy.

In the classroom, I had easily categorized students based on work ethic and ability. There were the "good" students who always brought their drafts, did the assigned reading, spoke in class, and took exact notes. Then there were the "ballcaps" in the back of the room, the young men who seemed only marginally engaged in school and who often interjected sarcastic comments into any class discussion. There were also the shy students who were usually prepared, but who would never speak a word in class. There were the perpetually late and the perpetually absent. These broad, uncritical categories allowed me to avoid thinking about the individual makeup of any class and about the individual learning needs within it. I was neither seeing students as complex persons nor allowing my own multiple locations to inform what I perceived to be my role as teacher.

Jimmy set the agenda for our meetings, thus displacing me from the center of authority and unsettling my teacherly desire for stability and, perhaps, control. Here was a student who clearly did not fit my prior categories.

By its very design, UNL's writing center led me to reconsider my role as a teacher, allowing me a space to interrogate, reflect on, and transform the theoretical, personal, and institutional voices that informed my work and my relationships with students. The structure of the writing center is such that teachers meet one-on-one with students in weekly fifty-minute sessions, responding as fellow writers and readers of texts and asking questions to get students to think more about their writing. Students can work on any type of writing, not just academic or course-related writing, and there is no evaluation or grading. Other than a closer physical and mental proximity to students, I imagined that teaching in the writing center would be similar to classroom teaching. I expected the writing center students would fit into my teacherly categories and I was convinced that my classroom strategies would easily transfer to the writing center. What I failed to understand, however, was the profound effect that working at the margins of the institutional hierarchy of grades and formal class structures would have on my relationships with students and on my approach to teaching. This border space pushed students and teachers toward critical reflection that is not always possible when we are enmeshed in traditional classroom interactions.

Disrupting the Student-Teacher Relationship

It soon became apparent to me that I could not fit writing center students into a neat typology. Students came with a wide variety of writing experiences and concerns: Juan came to practice writing and speaking in English to help him in his future search for a teaching job; Lily wanted to work on writing structure for her education courses; and John, a creative writer, wanted time to write and a person to respond to his writing. Even the authority that I derived from teaching writing within the field of English studies was challenged by the broad range of disciplines represented in the students who came to the writing center. In any given day, it was likely that most of the students I worked with would be writing on subjects outside of my discipline and in varied forms, ranging from a lab report for

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biology to an application essay to Teacher's College. Working closely with different students on many types of writing in this unique space disrupted my idea of the relationship between student and teacher. Over the course of the semester, I came to realize that for a pedagogical relationship to be truly student centered, I had to move beyond method and enter into a dialogue that includes the fluid, changing, and contradictory stories of both student *and* teacher. I had to become, as bell hooks says in *Teaching to Transgress*, an engaged teacher, concerned not only with students and their lives, but with how teaching and learning fit into my life.

Of the many students who forced me to think about my teaching, two of them, Jimmy and Judy, though very different from each other in their needs, goals, and agendas, were especially influential in helping me to reexamine my pedagogical position.

Encountering Jimmy

Jimmy had just returned to UNL to finish his BA and to improve his writing skills, which he considered far below where they should be. A recently retired NFL linebacker, Jimmy was an outstanding football player during both high school and university. He was also deaf. In a process log written after our first session, Jimmy described his writing as "English code" and said that it was difficult for him to express himself in English grammar. For him, writing and reading involved translation from and to American Sign Language, his first language. In this way, Jimmy was like other ESL students. However, unlike other ESL students, Jimmy had, because of his athletic ability, been mainstreamed and passed through the system.

It soon became apparent that Jimmy was very frustrated both at his inability to communicate and at the school system for not serving his needs. Jimmy knew that what he wanted from the writing center and from me as his writing center teacher was what he had not received in all his high school and university classes — real attention to his writing so that he could improve his fluency in English. From the outset, Jimmy set the agenda for our meetings, thus displacing me from the center of authority and unsettling my teacherly desire for stability and, perhaps, control. Here was a student who clearly did not fit my prior categories.

Although I had worked with many people with hearing disabilities in my former position as information officer with the Alberta Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, I had never taught a student with hearing disabilities and did not know exactly how to approach this pedagogical situation. Unfortunately, I then saw my prior work experiences as part of the rest of my life, which somehow seemed to exist outside of the ways in which I conceptualized myself as a teacher. It would take me a large part of the semester to see that I needed to connect this part of my own history to my current dialogue with Jimmy.

Through interacting with deaf people in my former job, I knew that there is a deaf culture that is separate from the hearing world and that there is a fierce pride and independence that accompanies it. Unlike many of the ESL students with whom I worked, Jimmy had a home culture with which I at least had a bit of familiarity. At the outset, however, I felt pressure to teach Jimmy how to write, even though I had no idea how to do so. I thought I would somehow be his educational savior, redressing the wrongs he had suffered from the educational system so that he would be able to communicate his own story and ideas. Unfortunately, in my role as teacher, I neglected everything that I knew about the hatred of paternalism that is so strong in deaf culture.

With Jimmy I was not so much a teacher as a co-learner, negotiating ways to communicate and slowing down so that my usual teacherly monologue could be displaced by real dialogue. I suspect now that Jimmy refused an interpreter for just this reason.

As a teacher, I thought that I knew what Jimmy needed. In my teaching log after our first session, I wrote,

> *Jimmy is very serious about improving his writing. He is taking several courses in which he will write. I think that he thought I would be doing some of his proofreading (or most of it). Now he realizes that I will help him to be a good proofreader. He is eager to learn about writing and to improve his skills.*

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In this passage, it is evident that I tried simply to *diagnose* Jimmy's problem and provide a solution for it. In one meeting, I had already speculated ("I think he thought") that Jimmy wanted a proofreading service from me. But notice that my wording here betrays the fact that I'm not positive, that I'm not sure at all what Jimmy thinks. In fact, throughout the semester, I was never sure what Jimmy thought, although I wanted to believe that I was, just as I wanted to believe that I knew what my classroom and other writing center students needed and thought. Also, in this passage I delineate one of my perceived functions in our relationship: "I will help *him* to be a good proofreader." At this point, I did not even know Jimmy's issues with writing, but, as a teacher, I projected my own solutions to the problem that I perceived. After all, I surmised, isn't that what teachers are supposed to do?

Moving Toward Dialogue

There was no doubt that Jimmy and I needed to enter into a dialogue about his writing and learning. But when I first began working with Jimmy, my concept of dialogue was a long way from the dialogue Paulo Freire describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: "a horizontal relationship of which a mutual trust between the dialoguers is a logical consequence" (1970, p. 72). Working with Jimmy, however, would lead me to understand and internalize Freire's definition.

I soon learned that student-teacher dialogue between Jimmy and me would be difficult because of the language barrier that separated us. Jimmy did not want a third person in the room to sign or translate our conversation because of his past experiences with teachers ignoring him and talking to the interpreter. Despite the frustrating difficulties that we often had communicating, Jimmy wanted our sessions to be unmediated. We wrote to each other, took additional time for our sessions, and repeated what we had said to each other as slowly as possible. Through this long and often frustrating process, I came to see the ways in which my pedagogy was not as student-centered as I had previously imagined. The frustration and disruption were generative to me since I was under no institutional pressures to pass him through, but was instead forced to continually think about our writing relationship. I came to see that in my relationship with Jimmy I was not so much a teacher as a co-learner, negotiating ways to communicate and slowing down so that my usual teacherly monologue could be displaced by real dialogue. I suspect now that Jimmy refused an interpreter for just this reason.

Freire writes, "As a democratic relationship, dialogue is the opportunity available to me to open up to the thinking of others, and thereby not wither away in isolation" (1995, p. 119). My interactions with Jimmy disrupted my thinking about my teaching, led me to see what real dialogue is and, in the process, opened me up to his thinking and caused me to critically reflect on my own pedagogical practices.

Working with Jimmy in the writing center allowed me to begin to talk back to the pedagogical voices that informed my teaching — past teachers, past teaching

experiences, past theories — since these voices gave me little or no direction in my working relationship with Jimmy. Instead, over the course of the semester, I learned that I needed to rely on Jimmy as much as, or perhaps even more than, he needed to rely on me; I learned that a dialogue is, as Augusto Boal said in his keynote address at the Pedagogy of the Oppressed Conference, more than the sum of two monologues.

Since Jimmy was older than most students and had come to the realization that his disability did not have to equate to a substandard education, he did not allow me to slip into the easy role of knowing teacher. Instead, Jimmy asserted himself and expressed anger at how he had previously been served and was being served (or not served) by the educational system. Much of this resentment at the educational system comes across in a paper that Jimmy wrote for a class on sociology on deviant behavior and disability:

> *It was not easy for people around me to understand my personal struggles and often they were unable to relate to me. As in my childhood, the challenges I faced forced me to overcome them and be successful. I have learned to share my feelings with people who will understand and have learned a great deal about my feelings and behaviors towards Cultural Transmission from my Sociology class. One example is that I have failed some exams due to my difficulty in communicating American Sign Language over to English. It is not that I have not studied, rather it's my misunderstanding of the English language. This has been frustrating again and again because I have tried the best I can.*
>
> *This problem has existed for years. In past years, instructors have given me good grades as an easy way out, because I am deaf, instead of teaching me the correct way. . . . So, deviant behavior from people with disabilities is often misunderstood. They just simply want to be taught like everyone else and understood like everyone else.*

Even though Jimmy was writing here about his own experience and not specifically about his experience with me in the writing center, after reading this paper and talking to Jimmy about it over a number of weeks, I came to see myself in his critique. He helped me to reconsider the ways I had been evading the needs of individual students in my classes by not acknowledging the different ways that people learn and not listening to the polyphony of classroom voices. Further, in the course of our one-on-one dialogue, I recognized the importance of my prior experience working with deaf people — experience I had somehow placed outside of my teacherly role. In this dialogue, Jimmy's history was important, but so was mine.

Encountering Judy

Another student who prodded me into further reflection on my personal history that semester was Judy, a transfer student from a Bible college in Omaha. She had taken first-year composition at her former school and came to the writing center to finish putting together a writing portfolio so that she could be granted credit for that course. From the outset, Judy was the kind of student I had initially expected in the writing center because she fit into the stable student categories that I had constructed from classroom teaching— a "good" student who was hard working and would cause little disruption. She provided me with a marked contrast to Jimmy, and through the course of the semester, I thought a lot about the differences between my sessions with the two of them and, eventually, about how even Judy did not fit neatly into my student schema.

I was quite happy to have Judy as a student because her needs, at least as I perceived them then, fit perfectly into the things I was doing in my classroom at that time in the semester — invention and generative exercises. I knew, or thought I knew, exactly how to approach working with Judy and this initially affirmed my conception of myself as a teacher. After my second meeting with Judy, I wrote in my teaching log:

> *Today's meeting with Judy went quite well. I had her do the exercise that involves listing shoes and then freewriting about experiences/ memories related to one of those pairs. From that exercise she has begun a piece on helping Kansas flood victims. She is extremely self-directed and writes very well.*

As I often did in the classroom, I overlaid my template of student-centered pedagogy onto Judy, congratulating myself on allowing students to choose their own topics for writing. I am not saying that using exercises such as this one to generate topics is necessarily bad pedagogy — in

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fact, I still use similar exercises to help students to generate ideas. What I am criticizing is my easy self-congratulation because Judy fits into the role of "good student;" I give her the exercise, she does it, and therefore she is self-motivated and my pedagogy "works." In fact, my sense that I was giving her what she needed allowed me to maintain the kind of pedagogical distance that I had set up in my classroom.

I became increasingly aware that my interactions with Judy were also problematic. I was not seeing Judy the person, but rather Judy the ideal writing-center student.

As the semester progressed, however, my work with Jimmy caused me to reexamine my relationship with Judy. While Judy and I had none of the trouble communicating that I had experienced with Jimmy, the substance of our talk was superficial, with little listening on my part because I thought that I knew who she was and what she needed. As my dialogue with Jimmy deepened, I became increasingly aware that my interactions with Judy were also problematic.

Initially, Judy and I were pleased with our relationship. On the same day that I had called her "extremely self-directed," Judy wrote:

> *Today I did an exercise on listing 10 pairs of shoes that I have had and then I had to choose one to write on—freestyle writing. Wow did that generate the ideas. I love exercises like that because it helps me to remember what I have been through and how much I can write about. . . . I'm glad that I have these 2 hours a week set aside to write because I probably wouldn't write if I didn't.*

Here Judy echoes my assessment of her — she enjoys writing, knows her reasons for writing, and is glad to have the time to write. These are themes that she comes back to throughout the semester in her process log. Based on comments such as these, I decided that Judy was a remarkably motivated student who needed little from me. And, as the semester progressed, she was, in fact, to receive very little of my attention. Increasingly, I found myself working with multiple students during our appointments and, because I thought Judy needed me the least, I often paid more attention to what I perceived were greater needs of my other students. However, it soon became apparent that I was not seeing Judy the person, but rather Judy the ideal writing-center student. About a month into the semester, Judy wrote in her process log:

> *This tutoring business is hard but good. I enjoy sitting and writing and it's good having someone available to critique my writing, but Dale has been spending the whole time with other students. Those students do need more help, but I am having difficulty seeing what level I am at as a writer.*

As the good student, Judy downplays her own needs and rationalizes that others need more help than she does. However, she is clearly not happy with the situation and wants to talk about her writing. During the session for which she wrote this process log, I was actually working with Jimmy. In my teacher's log for that day, I noted only that Judy "spent most of the period writing at the computer while I was with Jimmy."

As I came to realize that Judy, my ideal student, had become unhappy because I was not meeting her learning needs, I was forced to reflect on my own literate history. As a student, I too had felt I was not getting the attention that I needed because others needed more help. I too did not speak up because I did not want to cause problems. I had not been engaged as a student because I didn't see teachers willing to engage with me. As a result, through my early years in university, I became resentful of an educational system and teachers who did not see me as a complex individual. I moved from being a "good" student to being a "ballcap." This episode with Judy made me realize that I was being unfair both to Judy and to all the students I had labeled by avoiding real dialogue of the sort I was beginning to have with Jimmy.

However, since we were on the margins of the usual institutional hierarchies, Judy had decided to speak up in her process log, albeit in a polite and muted manner. Reflecting on her experience allowed her to name the problem; critical reevaluation of my experience had allowed me to understand it. Acting on it was another matter. I still felt pressure to spend more time with other students who seemed to need more of my attention. Still, for what remained of the semester, I tried much harder to engage her in dialogue. I learned about her educational history, her involvement in charities, the importance of religion in her life, her career plans, and the ways in which she wanted to use writing. Through our conversations, I

began to see the multiple locations that informed Judy. I tell myself that we made some strides toward dialogue, but I fear Judy was shortchanged in our pedagogical relationship. Though she did finish the portfolio she began, I wonder if her experience in the writing center went much beyond having a place to write.

Seeing Students as Individuals

My experiences with Jimmy and Judy compelled me to profoundly revise two aspects of what I had seen as my student-centered pedagogy. First, I realized that I needed to see *all* students as individuals with individual needs, and second, I needed to rethink my role as teacher so that it was fully integrated into the rest of my life. These two changes were necessary preconditions for establishing a relationship of dialogue with students. My time in the writing center started for me a process of ongoing reflection on and evaluation of what I am doing, expecting, and assuming as I teach.

Since that semester in the writing center, I have tried to move my classroom teaching in a direction that really is student-centered, though I almost hesitate to use that term because it is so overused and ill-defined. As I describe in "Beginning Where They Are: A Re-vision of Critical Pedagogy," I realized that I had to learn about individual students and to talk *with* them rather than *at* them, that I had to allow my own multiple experiences to inform my teaching, and that I had to be continually critical and self-reflective about my pedagogical theory and practice.

Does that mean that I've thrown all my previous teaching strategies out the window? No, of course not. I still use peer groups, but now I participate in them as a writer who both gives and gets feedback. I also ask a lot more questions of individual people about their experiences in small groups and encourage much more reflection about what we are accomplishing in them. In class discussions, I give much more opportunity for student voices and try not to make my voice the center of the classroom so that we are engaged in a dialogue like the kind that was possible in the writing center. At times, that means that there is silence in the classroom, something I am still teaching myself to tolerate. At other times, I can hardly get a word in. None of these changes, however, mean that I withhold my knowledge about writing, but rather that it becomes part of a dialogue instead of a deposit into a group of passive students.

Now every other week, each student comes to a conference with me in which we discuss a piece of writing that he or she has decided to bring. While the idea of conferencing is not new or startling, my experience in the writing center has convinced me to think of conferencing differently. A conference is not primarily an opportunity to instruct a student one on one; rather it is a site for substantive dialogue, a place where I can learn from students and take seriously what they have to say.

My experiences in the writing center provided an ideal site for productive disruption and subsequent critical reflection. The center is a place where all involved — students and teachers — can engage in a continual critique and constant revision; it is a structure that helps guard against complacency.

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A Cure for Writer's Block:

Writing for Real Audiences

BY ANNE RODIER

We've worked hard to raise our inner-city school's writing scores. Our crumbling walls are set amidst the projects, a place where one wouldn't expect to find young people doing much writing other than graffiti or love letters. It took us years of goofs to figure out how to encourage our students to become successful writers, but today our school's writing scores are third highest of twenty-five schools in the district.

Over time we have discovered that our students are just like us: They have to grow into being writers. They have to believe that what they have to say is important enough to bother writing. They have to experience writing for real audiences before they will know that writing can bring them power.

This year, I've been watching the way one of my seniors, Rudy, approaches writing. I find it amusing that he's a lot like me. He can't settle down to his work. Any distraction interrupts him. He can't use a pencil, needs music, a better chair, a different atmosphere. According to him in his letter to the reviewer of his portfolio, "You can't make romantic love at a head banger's ball or tap dance at a Hip-Hop party. I wish I could scribble off hundreds of pages, but if my surroundings aren't right, then I can't work.... I'm an artist. I'm committed to the art form. We've been dating, engaged, and married until talent do us part. I love what I do."

I've been working on "Emily," my great American novel-in-progress, for years, and I think I'm also at the wrong party. I've probably bought about fifty new pens to try for inspiration, experimented with blue, pink, and yellow legal paper, tried wide ruled and college. I've moved my writing desk to every room in my house, and discovered thirty different favorite composers who most inspire my writing. I never write in my loft. My exercise bike is there and it makes me feel guilty because I'm not using it. I go to my favorite restaurant, the Come Back Inn, try a glass of wine, wear a special shirt, put my hair up, take it down, hold a crystal, put pictures of my last trip around me.

Playing Writer

Like Rudy, I'm in love with being a writer. It doesn't matter that I talk about writing my novel more than I actually write it. Even my daughter caught me at playing writer. We were shopping for lamps. She wanted cheap and functional. She found hers quickly. I turned on each one, traded lamp shades and tried to sense the mood each might create for my writing. After forty minutes, her patience gave out.

"I know you need the perfect lamp to create your romantic notion of being a writer in your loft. Here, pick the Victorian one." I did.

Why do Rudy and I fidget rather than write? Rudy calls it "writer's block." I think it's something else. We both have a hard time finding exactly why we are writing and to whom.

Rudy and I both write very personal, autobiographical stuff. We both read works by others who do the same. We still get nowhere. Rudy has a deadline — portfolios are due in April. "Emily" has no deadline. Her purpose is to help me keep my romantic image of being a writer. The audience for my novel is nebulous. I can't seem to pin it down. I don't know how to help Rudy.

"What are you trying to say here, Rudy?"

"I don't know. It's a feeling I want to give the reader."

For him, it's always love. For me, it's the wonder of revelation about life.

A few years ago, I published a book. My publisher made me meet deadlines. I procrastinated, but I had a story I wanted to tell and an audience who needed to hear it. A very good friend had just died of AIDS, and I had to navigate my way through the medical and legal issues attached to his long and depressing illness amidst an array of attitudes expressed by the people surrounding us. His parents abandoned him completely, while some very welcome and sometimes unexpected support came from friends and AIDS organizations. It was important to me that I let others who were dealing with similar issues know that they weren't alone, that there are many who are caring supporters when family fails to be so. With AIDS at an epidemic level, the need for immediacy hung heavy on my pen and I pushed myself to get my story into my readers' hands.

Having a Story to Tell

When our department became embroiled in censorship, my students learned firsthand the power of having a story to tell. One of our teachers was offering an optional novel that dealt with issues of race, religion, and homosexuality. When some members of the community got wind of this book's contents, they objected, and our students' real-life lessons in writing began. Parents wanted the book banned and the teacher fired. Our students felt otherwise. They spoke at hearings, wrote the press, spoke to reporters. We told them to shape all their thoughts in writing first so that they would

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be better prepared, more organized. After months of turmoil, their efforts were rewarded and the book remained as an optional reading choice with parental permission. The author sent us flowers and we all felt powerful. The English department finally learned the meaning of real-life writing: It allows one to shape one's life and change one's world.

Louise Rosenblatt talks about the "poem," or the meaning, being the coming together of the writer, text, and reader (1994, p.12). What we discovered through our censorship experience is that the "poem" is the coming together of any writer, text, and reader for real purposes, not the student writing for the teacher for a grade.

Motivating Students

What if part of every student's curricular year included real-life, change-your-world writing? What if every teacher guided students to find the right focus for the right audience? What if they actually expected responses as a result of their writing? The possibilities are endless. Papers in science journals, poetry in *Redbook*, changes in local government, financial support for school and personal projects, TV scripts, children's books, grants to fund science projects, fights against censorship.

Students writing for real audiences are motivated in a way that students churning out papers for grades are not. As for Rudy, I knew he did not care much about grades. I approached him after his two-week winter vacation at his family's home in New York.

"How'd your writing go over the break?" Rudy was sprawled in my chair, a bit on guard, wondering about my motives. I am his teacher, after all, and he missed a big deadline. Several totally revised, ready-to-publish pieces were due before the break. He'd left town planning to work on a delightful, unfinished piece chronicling his love for beautiful women, specifically one who had been unfaithful, causing him to end their relationship. I had hopes that he'd found his muse in the Big Apple.

"Well," he shifted and put on his best student-working-the-teacher attitude. "I went home and I saw three shows!"

This ruse worked for a minute because he knew how much I envied his time at these Broadway shows. I really wanted to hear his story.

Students have to experience writing for real audiences before they will know that writing can bring them power.

"Of course, we did New Year's on Times Square. It was packed, you couldn't move, and someone started shooting right after the ball dropped."

How could I not respond to that? I'd clung to the television coverage of Times Square while he was actually there.

Rudy squirmed again, then confessed. "I didn't really write. I just hung out. I was home, in the old neighborhood." He paused. Fidgeted. "I still can't figure out what to write."

Naming Your Audience

That's when I pounced. "Rudy, I know what your problem is. Who are you telling this story to? Who would you really talk to about your feelings about this girl?"

At first, he just looked at me like I was nuts, but I could see his brain working. He smiled, "Yeah. That's exactly the problem."

"Who's your audience, Rudy?"

"I guess anyone."

"No. You need to find a real audience."

"But who would want to read this?"

"My point exactly! Let's try out some ideas. How about a feature article for the school newspaper offering advice to students about relationships?"

No response.

"Maybe a letter to her telling her what you think about what she did to you?" He shook his head.

"A short story creating the anguish and pain you felt, aimed at teenage readers so they know they aren't alone in their misery?"

He gave me a "duh" kind of look as if to ask why he would care about other teens' problems.

"Come on, help me here. You obviously want to tell this story. Who cares about it?"

Rudy finally lifted his eyebrows. I knew he had an idea. "I have a cousin in Brooklyn. I talk to him a lot. He could be my audience." Pause. Brain action. "But then should I write it like I'd really write to him? I mean, we'd say she had a fat ass, but that doesn't seem right for what I'm writing."

"Hmm." I paused. Brain action. "Sometimes when I write home, I actually employ my craft. My family knows I'm an English teacher and a writer. But every now and then, I write a letter that makes them say, 'I can see why Anne's an English teacher and a writer.'"

A grin. "Yeah, kind of like performing, acting through writing, like having a—"

"Persona, a voice, telling the right story to the right person in the right way."

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"That's what I'll do then. Yeah! I'll write to my cousin, he'll be my audience. But—"

"What?"

"Well, the girl has tried to get tight with me again. I don't like her anymore. I don't want to see her. Do I add that or what?"

"I don't know. I guess you're going to have to make that choice as a writer."

"Okay, yeah, I think that's what I'll do."

"And Rudy, about your deadline."

"I know, it's due in March."

"No, it's due next week. A full draft."

I escorted him, late, to class amidst protests that he wanted to stay and write. Maybe he'd go home and finish it if I let the tension build.

We really do fail our students when we don't help them find a way to write real stuff, and if I hadn't struggled as a writer as Rudy has struggled, I wouldn't have been able to help him find his audience. What it all comes to is that if what you are writing has no possibility of making a difference, of reaching a real audience for real purposes, then there will be no investment in the work. When our inner-city students score higher in writing than the East End privileged kids, we know it's because we don't have them write just for a grade. We have them write for real.

That year, Rudy became a professional writer. He learned to identify an audience for the story that he was aching to tell. Now he's in New York with a recording contract, writing song lyrics for — it goes without saying — real audiences.

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NWP's latest contribution to successful classroom practice: *Teacher-Researchers at Work*, a new book by Marion MacLean and Marian Mohr

Here's a book that shows the way for any aspiring teacher-researcher and provides an essential resource for those who lead teacher-research groups. This is a volume that belongs in every teacher-training institution library and in the teacher resource center of every school district.

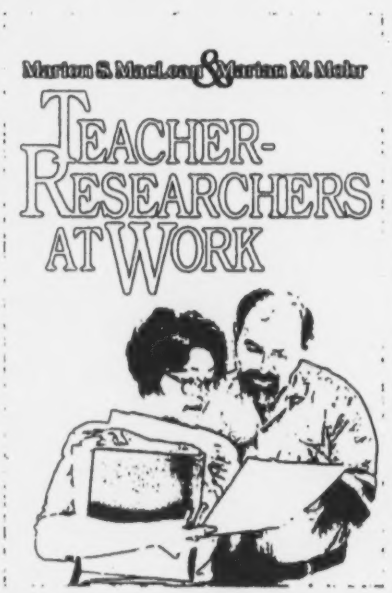
The authors themselves are teacher-researchers and understand the pitfalls and the dedication that are part of the process, as well as the joy of completing a classroom research project.

I wish this volume had been available when I began my own journey as a teacher-researcher.

—**Bob Tierney,** coauthor with Anne Wotring of *Two Studies of Writing in High School Science.*

Teacher-Researchers at Work *is an invaluable guide through the often perplexing and anxiety-ridden process of teacher research. It takes its text from the works and practices of teacher-researchers themselves. It is honest, thorough, encouraging and intelligent.*

—**Jane Juska,** teacher-research leader and winner of The Education Writers of America Award for best article in an educational journal.



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Lessons in Literacy:

What a Five-Year-Old Taught Her Teacher-Mom

BY EVE NEWSOME

Eve Newsome taught elementary students who were labeled as learning disabled in the Prince William County, Virginia, public schools for 14 years and plans to return someday, but her most recent classroom has been her own home. She and her husband now have nine children: teenagers Samson and Saul, who attend public high school; Sarah (9), a fifth grader in public school; as well as Seth (8), Silas (6), Simon (5), Susanna (3), Shad (15 months), and Samuel (3 months), who are home-schooled students. Her study of Sarah's emerging literacy shows the combination of motherhood and teaching that Newsome has managed in the recent crowded years of her life. She continues to see the discoveries from her original study unfolding in her younger children.

—Marian Mohr and Marion MacLean authors of Teacher-Researchers at Work

On maternity leave one fall, I made some of my greatest strides since starting my teaching career thirteen years ago. The conditions under which I gained these insights were, for me, anything but normal.

Following the birth of our sixth child earlier in the year, I was looking forward to having my "time off" with the kids. As four of the six were preschoolers and work was an hour away, life had become pretty hectic.

What I hadn't been prepared for was the withdrawal I would experience from being out of the classroom. It truly caught me by surprise. But I knew my children needed me at home, and I needed a break, so I compromised with myself by taking a graduate course on teacher research offered through my school system. Though I loved my children and was grateful to be home, I reasoned that the adult conversation would be good for me. The only difficulty at that point was controlling the urges I had, during our research seminar dinner breaks, to wipe off the chins and hands of my classmates.

"Teaching" Sarah at Home

Assuming the role of the student and not the educator was a rather uneasy turn of events for a "seasoned veteran" such as myself. Back home, I found myself in the same unsettling position.

I had chosen as my research project to focus on the growing literacy of my five-year-old daughter, Sarah. The research would center mainly on her writing, but would not exclude speaking and reading.

It seemed like a perfectly natural project with easy access and textbook conditions. She was, after all, a special seed (from my own personal stock!) at the peak of planting time, and I was the wise and experienced gardener, ready to water her, to nurture her, and bend to her every little need, right?

Imagine my surprise as my 3-foot, 30-pound child demonstrated to me her incredible insight into the field of emerging literacy. Sarah, with her boundless energy, was educating *me*.

She had begun kindergarten in August, but she experienced extreme adjustment problems. She was a young five, having turned in mid-September, and though very bright, she needed more time with a full-time mommy than with a full-time teacher. After six weeks of grueling deliberation, my husband and I pulled our daughter out of school. Instead, I thought confidently, I'll just "teach" her at home. What a great way to blend my new stay-at-home role *and* my research project. I had visions of all the hours I would spend teaching my daughter to read and write. Oh, the massive amounts of quality time we would share together!

Then came the glitch. September 16, four days after Sarah's birthday, my husband, Sam, a police detective, was involved in a car accident at work. At first, his injuries didn't appear to be too extensive, but complications set in and eventually put him on long-term leave from work. All the "quality time" I had dreamed of quickly dissipated in light of new circumstances.

I kept thinking, "I'll sit down and start to teach her soon." Everyone in my class was already collecting data, and I winced under the internal pressure of coming to class empty-handed. To appease myself, I began to collect little writings she would do during the day. "Better than nothing," I thought, "and besides, just think how great she'll look in comparison when we *really* get started!" But that fall we never did get started. Thankfully, life teaches us in unexpected ways. The more I collected data from Sarah, the closer I came to a startling revelation: Sarah did not need highly structured direct instruction in language to grow more literate.

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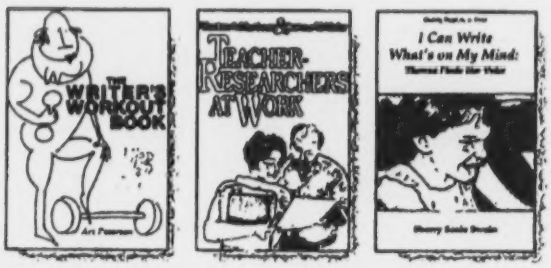

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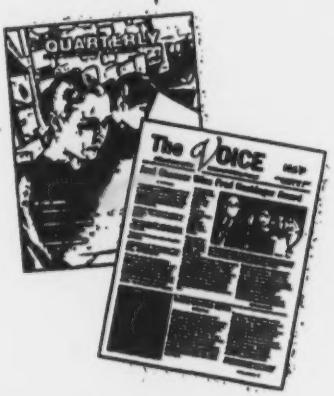

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Lessons in Literacy: What a Five-Year-Old Taught Her Teacher-Mom

— *continued from p. 19*

She wrote a lot during the month of September, including the following:

- ABC's copied from a writing tablet.
- A get well card for Daddy. The outside of the card is shown in Figure 1. On the inside, Sarah had written more text, including "I SEE BUDDY [our puppy] LOOKING AT ME." This text was modeled after "Brown Bear, Brown Bear."
- Several independent writings (see one example in Figure 2). These writings show an understanding of left-right and top-to-bottom progression.

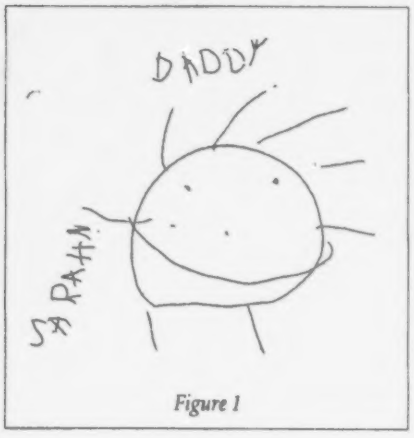

Figure 1

The more I looked at her "writings," the more I realized that my daughter was learning at an enormous clip, despite my failure to impart to her the necessary keys to knowledge. She had simply picked up the keys herself, and was driving that Chevy down the block! I was just shy of indignant at first. How could she be learning so much without good old mom showing her what to do? I was almost, well, hurt! But the educator inside got the better of me, and I

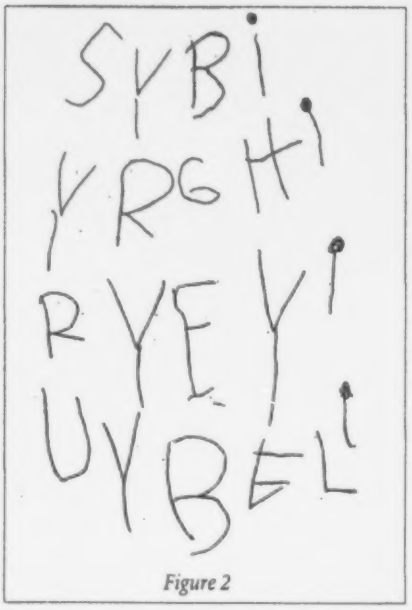

Figure 2

began thinking, "Hey! How *is* she learning this stuff?" I knew I didn't teach it to her, and she didn't learn it at school because she wasn't there. My research project had suddenly turned into just that, a research project.

The Innate Desire to Grow

Seeds are pretty amazing things. Even with all our wonderful scientific advancements, we cannot duplicate the innate power intrinsically contained in one of those tiny brown grains. We can land a man on the moon, but we can never ourselves create the beauty of one delicate blossom. We *can* create and manipulate within certain technological aspects of our environment, but there are some natural forces or properties that we can never create. Instead, we can merely interact with them.

This is the way with teaching and children. We can interact with an intrinsic system already in place in that child, but let us not be so bold as to believe that we put it there.

One of the things I have learned from my research, I believe, is that children have an innate desire to "grow" their knowledge. They *want* to learn, to communicate, to make a mark on a piece of paper that says, "Hey, everybody! Here I am!" It's not necessarily a desire we impart to them, but perhaps a desire they already possess.

There has been much research in recent years focusing on the innate predisposition for language in children. Janet Emig discusses this in *The Web of Meaning* (1983). She makes the point that as humans we seem to have a genetic predisposition to speak and write that can be helped along by an enabling environment as well as ample opportunities.

Much to my surprise, this is exactly what I discovered in my research with Sarah. I say surprise, because this is not at all what my research was originally focused on. I was following the question, "What features do I see emerging in Sarah's writing?" I figured my research would be more technical in nature, in that I would present Sarah with bits of information, analyze the literacy-related features that emerged, and document them. But in reality, the opposite happened. She presented me with bits of information, and I had to analyze how they got there. My focus had now shifted toward my follow-up question: "What factors have had an impact on the development of those features?"

Throughout the fall, Sarah's writing continued to develop. Figure 3 shows a passage she copied from a children's book, *The Polar Express*. Even though she was

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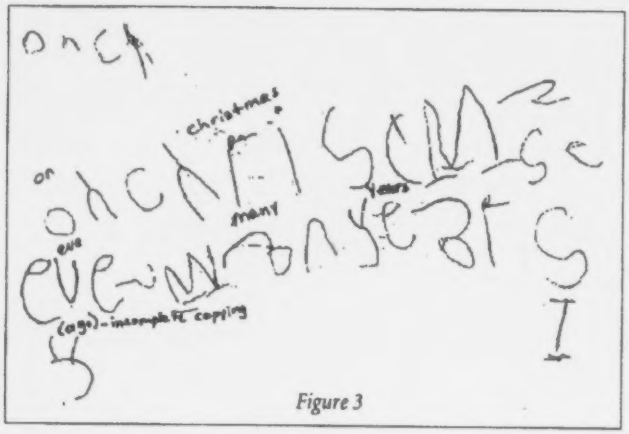

Figure 3

obviously unfamiliar with writing lower case letters, and the typed letters presented a challenge, this did not deter her in the least!

The Paths to Literacy

As I went through my observational and reflective logbooks, I found massive quantities of data. To be sure, there was lots of technical stuff, such as left-to-right progression, letter writing, sound-symbol associations, and other assorted teacher jargon, but those were not what drew me. I kept thinking, "How did she learn all this stuff in the absence of teaching?" I listed the models she used for her writing, as well as the features I felt were really influencing her. I listed her writing utensils. I scoured my reflective log for thoughts or comments that seemed most relevant and listed them.

I also tried a technique we had learned about in class, where we were to "draw" what we felt our data was showing us. I drew four little "webs" that showed the data I collected from her in four areas: drawing, writing, talking, and television. I put "stars" next to the data where I had directly intervened or taught her something. I was sorely disappointed by the low star count.

As we shared our drawings in class, a new picture popped into my mind, and quickly I drew it: three paths merging together at the end, at the point of literacy. At the entrance to the road on the left stood Sarah and me. This was a fairly straight road, but blocked by many fences. Was too much formal intervention on my part going to block the natural flow of her learning? At the entrance to the road at the right, stood Sarah all alone. This road twisted and turned all over the place, finally reaching the end point. If I left her completely alone, would she wander all over the place, taking too much time to reach the road's end? The middle road was like a tightwire with Sarah perched on top. She had a balancing stick in her hand. Is the balance some delicate place between the other two roads? I didn't want to leave her in a precarious position while I experimented to find out.

What a relief to see my unconscious fears clearly pictured on that paper. I went back to analyzing my data with a new vigor. Even though her particular gains were many and impressive, I realized that my focus would center on how she went about acquiring her knowledge, and what my role was in her acquisition. What I found was that in so many ways, I *had* had an impact on her by having prepared the ground for her learning.

In all, I counted nineteen different "types" of writing or genres that Sarah had attempted in an approximate three-month span. They included:

- ABC's/letter writing (manuscript)
- numbers
- cards
- attempted word spelling
- stories
- scrolls
- books
- illustrations with labels
- appointment reminder slip
- notes
- lists
- song lyrics
- newspapers
- poetry
- friendly letter
- cursive writing
- gift tags
- birthday card
- a list of rules

I was astounded. I would have never attempted to teach such a wide variety of genres in such a short time span. So how did she do it?

First, I examined the list I had compiled of sources she had drawn from:

- TV shows and commercials (primarily, but not limited to, educational TV)
- videos
- books
- songs
- newspapers
- Mother Goose poems
- parents
- written models
- a Talking Teacher electronic game

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- an instruction manual
- a video script
- an appointment reminder card
- being read to
- conversation
- ABC's (in song and written form)

The correlation between these sources and the pieces she produced was extremely close.

Next, I looked at the features I felt had the most impact upon her development in the past three months:

- multiple language sources (listed above, which she used as models)
- questions I asked Sarah about her work
- television
- Sarah's requests for information
- her use of a "listener" to process and screen her work
- oral language
- mini-lessons
- her listening to the conversations of others
- singing
- drawing
- the availability of books, writing utensils, support, and positive feedback

Language, Language, Language

As I looked over this list, certain words jumped off the page: asking, listening, requesting, oral language, conversation. Language. Language. Language. Maybe, all this time, it was *language* producing all this language! For a moment I felt as if I were in a Susan Powter infomercial, where she's sharing her revelation about obesity with all the women in the audience. "I eat fat, I get fat. Hey! It's all that fat that's making me fat!"

Of course, I had been taught about immersing students in language and had made genuine attempts to incorporate this approach into my teaching plan. But now I *believed* it, because I had seen the results at a very personal level. I knew my approach would be much different when I returned to my class. No longer would I *attempt* to immerse my students in language; I *would* immerse them in language, because now there was conviction behind the cause.

Finally, I looked over the list of writing utensils Sarah had used: lined paper, unlined paper, construction paper, pencils, colored pencils, pens, markers, crayons, paint, stencils, Magna Doodle, and Talking Teacher. For the most part, she had free access to these materials whenever she wished, along with access to a box full of books in her room. She took advantage of these on a daily basis.

During December Sarah made real progress. About two weeks before Christmas, she planned a party for the family, complete with homemade gifts and tags. On a tag she wrote for Simon's gift, she made an attempt to sound out his name (SVOB). She had made a sound-symbol connection with the letter S.

She continued experimenting with sound-symbol relationships. One day, as she was attempting to write *ballerina*, she wrote the BL on her own, then got somewhat stuck, so I slowly sounded it out for her. She made the sound connections for RN after that for herself.

But her December progress was not limited to developing an understanding of phonics. She also showed an awareness of cursive as a form of writing by writing a "letter" to Santa in a continuous squiggly line. Another letter to Santa demonstrated her understanding of the form of a friendly letter (see Figure 4). She wanted it to be "just right," so she asked for help with spelling. I was amazed that without direct instruction she had learned that there was a "correct" spelling for each word, and that friendly letters took a particular form. Simply by hearing letters at home, she had learned the correct way to write one.

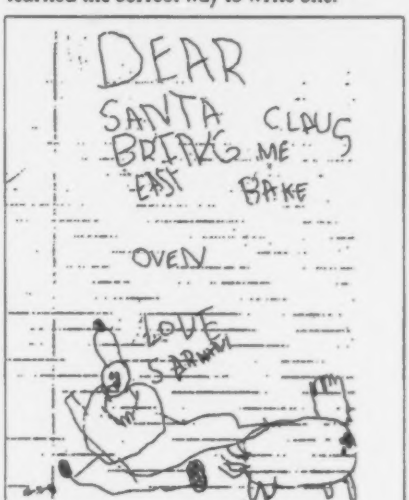

Figure 4

As I mulled over all this information, I gradually began to sort it into three general principles that had helped my daughter on her journey toward literacy.

Exposure

The first principle is *exposure*. Sarah had been exposed to language in many forms since the womb. (My husband used to put headphones on my tummy and play Southern gospel music to her.) We started reading *Pat the Bunny* at four months. She

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was constantly talked to by parents, brothers, and relatives. She was allowed to write (in reasonable locations) as soon as she could hold a crayon. Most recently, she had been exposed to educational TV and videos (such as Disney) that provided a wide diversity of language and writing models. Television appeared to play an important role in her development. She constantly asked questions about the meaning of words she had heard on her videos or on television commercials. She would subsequently incorporate them into her own writing or playing. In a like manner, she made full use of the range of writing genres she was exposed to at home, incorporating them into her own writings.

I was continually surprised by her ability to match vocabulary and reading style to the type of writing she was producing. Her newspaper stories were succinct and to the point, read with a no-nonsense voice, in contrast to her Aladdin story, which was flowery and flowy and utilized a great deal of dramatic intonation. In exposing Sarah to all of this, I had been preparing the soil for her seeds of literacy.

Availability

The second principle my data revealed is *availability*. Not only was Sarah exposed to language in its various forms, but she had a wide range of books, tapes (audio and video), models of real writing, writing materials (such as paper and pencils), and very importantly, available *people* to utilize, as her situation dictated.

When I read my data log, I noticed a phrase that I had constantly repeated. "I asked Sarah" showed up directly at least sixteen times and was implied several times beyond that. I realized that when I had felt saddened at the "low star count" indicating my lack of direct intervention, I had, in fact, been judging this against an incomplete concept of intervention. I had been intervening and teaching her all along, in subtle ways that had helped *redirect* her thinking toward the answer she sought, allowing *her* to discover the answers for herself.

So teaching then was not indelibly welded to the concept of direct intervention or control. It could just as easily be a subtle pass of the baton. Self-discovery seemed to be an important process for Sarah to go through in order for her to grasp and internalize information, thus making it her own.

This is not to say that there is not time or place for teachers to directly instruct students by actually showing them what to do. Take the lesson from the tub, for example. Early one morning, I had locked myself into the sole bathroom of our home to take a bath all by myself. In a house with six kids, this is a pretty hot commodity. Somehow, much to my chagrin, Sarah got the door open and traipsed in with all her writing paraphernalia in tow. She was obviously not a happy camper. She was having a tough "K" day, and just couldn't seem to get those little rascals under control. So I quickly extended a drippy hand, and gave her a speedy lesson on how the little bird beak touched the belly button of the straight line. Truthfully, I had just wanted to appease her, so I could get my bath. But the look in her eyes when she got that sudden burst of revelation, and that little giggle that accompanied her, "Oh, yeah, I get it!" will forever be one of those small treasures I hold dear. In my log I wrote:

> *Right after this quick "K" lesson, Sarah ran out to practice her K's. She returned a few minutes later with a banner about four feet long. The top was strewn with a long string of K's, and across the bottom were all eight members of our family, holding hands, in addition to the two dogs, who were also very happy. I feel the lesson was definitely a success.*

Opportunity

The final principle I found was *opportunity*: time to make use of the people and materials available to her and make them her own. This was growing time.

At some point during the collection phase of my research, I began to count how many times Sarah was asking to write (which meant getting out all of her "stuff"), and I was answering, "Not right now, I'm busy." Finally, I started saying, "Okay," and letting her know when I couldn't sit with her but would try to be available for occasional questions or as a listener. The point is that she *needed* to write. She needed to pick up books and "read." She needed to put on her dress-ups and act out *Alladin* and *Charlotte's Web*. This was where she processed the information and made it her own. It was obvious that she did not need my intervention, but merely my presence as an audience so that she could read aloud. In reality, she unconsciously used herself as an audience in those sessions and was then able to tell herself what didn't sound right or what she needed to change.

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But without opportunity, there is no product. Sometimes we are so busy *teaching* that we don't allow ample opportunity for our children to utilize, internalize, and assimilate information. Our schools are filled with over-tended plants that are dying simply because they never had time to grow. By "teaching" less, perhaps we will be producing more.

My research showed me that direct instruction, mini-lessons, formalized lessons and self discovery all have their place in teaching. We simply need to be sensitive to when it is necessary to step in, and when we need to back out. It occurred to me that, like Sarah, most children, before we get our "educational" hands on them, have the internal drive to mark up the paper and say, "I can!" The problem is too often, I think, we "teach" the urge right out of them, such as when we nitpick and edit their writing attempts to death.

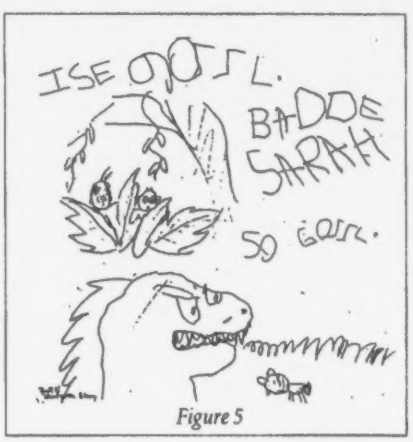

Figure 5

Being a Teacher and a Mom

I feel that this article would not be complete if I did not address the complicated issue of my dual roles in this research. Simply put, it was not always easy being a mom and a teacher at the same time. Some philosophies of mother and teacher walk hand in hand. Others do not.

When I started to collect data, a conflict arose. Do I intervene in her creative process? Do I structure, influence, teach or point out errors? Do I answer *all* her questions, particularly in mid-project? If I did, would I be altering the data in an unethical way? Would I be influencing conclusions drawn, making them impure by my so-called interventions?

In the end, I decided, unconsciously I suppose, to take a more parental role. I was simply there for her in the natural course of events, answering questions as they came along, with very little deliberate or structured teaching imposed — for example, the decisions whether or not to show her that her J's were backwards, or that P and Q were separate letters, for somehow she had joined them into one.

After much deliberation, my maternal side won out. Misty-eyed, I thought, "Forget changing it. Soon enough, she'll *obviously* figure all this out for herself." But for now, I felt that these are the precious gifts that warm a mother's heart, and the stuff that scrapbooks are made of.

By March, Sarah was writing her first original compositions. Figure 5 shows her first real story, which reads, "I see Godzilla. Buddy and Sarah see Godzilla." The picture was a joint effort. I had helped her to sound out the words more slowly, but she made all the letter connections.

And the letter in Figure 6 was written almost entirely independently. It reads,

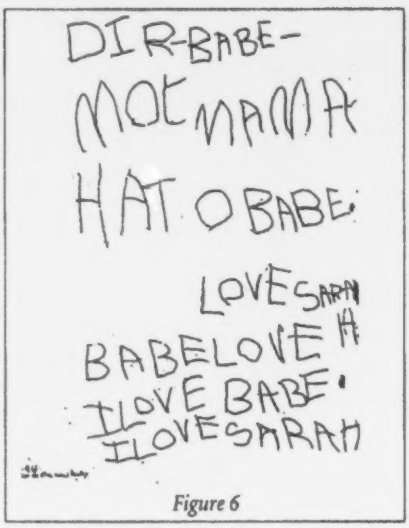

Figure 6

"Dear Baby, My mama had a baby. Love, Sarah."

Sarah is now using writing as a communication tool. And yes, the last letter is to the *new* baby — number seven. Obviously, Sam has had too much time off of work.

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Eve Newsome was a public school teacher at the Prince William County Schools in Virginia for 14 years. She is affiliated with the Northern Virginia Writing Project at George Mason University, and she is currently pursuing a master's degree in English education.

The Writer's Eye:

Using the Writer's Notebook as a Lens to View the World

BY SCOTT PETERSON

I have a picture of my daughter that I took when she was perhaps two or three years old. It is not a particularly good picture. It was shot in poor light and is somewhat dark and murky. Many of the fine details have been driven into the darkness around the edge of the image.

It is, nonetheless, a highly revealing portrait. The eyes are cast down and away, avoiding contact with the camera. In the corner of one a tear glistens, ready to follow the damp path of another that had already escaped down her cheek towards pouty lips. It is a picture of pure and complete dejection.

Scott Peterson's daughter Allison.

I can remember exactly why that tear was running down her cheek. She had been set up once again by her older sister. They had agreed to take turns playing each other's games — first with the oldest's Strawberry Shortcake dolls, then with the younger's Pretty Ponies. The first half of the afternoon went splendidly with both girls playing contentedly with the Shortcake dolls. Then came the younger's turn. Painstakingly she arranged her imaginary toy land precisely the way she wanted and finally called her sister over to play. They played for five or ten minutes. Then her sister abruptly announced she was bored and flounced off to watch Sesame Street.

I found my younger daughter sitting on the side of her bed, one lone tear sliding down her cheek, feet dangling over her shattered magic toy land, a perfect afternoon of play ruined by the betrayal of her older sister. I had been taking pictures of our Christmas tree and still had my camera slung over my shoulder. I captured her despair for posterity.

I learned something very important about my daughter that afternoon. She has a very clear vision of how things should work out — so clear that if things don't match her expectations, a disappointment way out of proportion to reality colors her world. One of my tasks as a father was going to be to help her discover that life is rich, deep, and full of miracles and the key to happiness is to find those miracles no matter how they come wrapped.

It is fifteen years later and that very same daughter is now getting ready to join her older sister in college. Yet every detail, every emotion, every insight connected with that photograph taken a decade and a half ago is still as fresh in my mind as if it happened only yesterday. Out of all the things I have witnessed in my daughter's life, why has this one been so deeply etched in my memory?

The reason this memory resonates so deeply with me is that I was looking at the world through a camera lens. When I view things through the eyes of a photographer, I am more aware of the world around me. I see more, hear more, feel more. I notice things that at any other time would slip past unobserved. I pick up on how the light slants off a brick wall, making the texture leap out, how lines and shapes work together to give a room a distinct feel.

Slipping a lens over my eye makes me seek out meaning and beauty in the world, helps me observe more closely how people feel and move in their environment. With the lens off my eye, I probably would have patted my daughter on the shoulder, told her everything will be all right and that she should pick up her toys and get ready for supper. With the lens on my eye, I was more open and aware of her feelings. I studied her, analyzed her, thought profoundly about

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her, and discovered an insight about her that otherwise would have slipped into oblivion. Fifteen years later, it burns brightly, illuminating the fundamental truth I learned about my daughter that afternoon.

Like a camera lens, a writer's notebook can be used to enhance our perceptions of the world, helping us to seek out beauty, to find and keep the little things that, when taken all together, weave the fabric of our lives. Christopher Isherwood describes the process well when he writes:

> *I am the camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording and not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day this will have to be developed, carefully fixed, and printed.* (Murray, 1990, p. 18)

Enlarging Our Vision

The writer's notebook plays a whole different role than other types of more functional writing. The vast majority of people view communication, or the transfer of ideas between two or more people, as the main purpose for writing. Getting ideas out and into the world is, indeed, a noble and worthwhile purpose for writing. Our far-flung relatives, for example, would have no idea if their gifts had made it through the mail if we did not communicate our appreciation via a written thank you note. Teachers would have at best an incomplete knowledge of what their students received from class if they didn't require them to display their insights on a piece of paper.

But to define writing only as communication is to do a disservice to the writing process. I propose a different purpose for writing. Rather than writing for others, we write for ourselves first, as a way of enlarging and clarifying our vision of the world. I propose that in effect we use the writer's notebook the same way one uses the camera lens — to see more clearly, to observe more closely, and to record insights and images on the pages of a notebook rather than on film.

The writer's notebook serves as the lens that magnifies and enhances all that is happening around us. It helps to pick out the uniqueness nestled amongst the mundane, to find the one flower in the crack in a sea of concrete. Saul Bellow writes:

> *I blame myself for not often enough seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary. Somewhere in his journal Dostoevski remarks that a writer can begin anywhere, at the most commonplace thing, scratch around in it long enough, pry and dig away long enough and, lo, soon he will hit upon the marvelous.* (Murray, 1990, p. 81)

The writer's notebook is the tool that helps us pluck the specialness out of the routine events of life.

The writer's notebook serves also as the basket where we store the nuggets dug out of the routines of life. It is a place to keep the wisps of ideas, images, and emotions that flit through our minds like the wings of a hummingbird and then drift off forever. To grab these events and record them in our notebooks serves a dual purpose — it allows us to experience life twice, once when we participate in the event and again when we record it. Anais Nin writes in her notebook, "We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in introspection" (Murray, 1990, p. 81).

Writer's notebooks can be used in the classroom as a way to make students more observant of the world around them.

Let me describe how the writer's notebook works in action. Not long ago, I was driving to school on a fall day. The weather had finally cleared after three days of cold drizzle. The sky was deep blue and the tree branches sparkled brightly in the early morning sun like white lights on a Christmas tree. I was driving slowly to work, drinking in the splendor, when I rounded a corner and came across a breathtaking sight. Up ahead was an ancient oak that had turned a brilliant, flaming yellow. Underneath, washed in the warm backlight from the tree, was a group of kids waiting for the school bus. Most were playing around and roughhousing in small groups. But one lone girl had separated from the rest of the herd and stood alone, framed perfectly by one of the huge limbs of the oak.

I realized immediately that there was something in that scene deeper than the surface beauty. At first, my attention was drawn to the perfect combination of early morning light, blue sky, and color, but then I realized that it was the lone girl framed

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underneath the branch that set the whole picture off and touched a place in my heart. When I got to work, I brushed aside the pile of papers that cluttered my desk and whipped out my notebook. I had to probe around and find out what carried the emotional impact in that scene before it flittered away forever.

I started by writing down exactly what I saw. I wanted only the colors of the leaves, the sparkle of the sunlight off raindrops on the branches, the smell of the fresh fall air exactly as it was. I wanted no analysis, no interpretation of the meaning to contaminate the memory. I wanted the sights and sounds and smells to show me the meaning that lay underneath the scene. The emotions and deeper meaning would speak through the concrete details.

And they did. As I scribbled the words in my notebook, the emotional impact of the picture began to reveal itself. The lone girl under the tree seemed to be focused on her own thoughts, removed from this beautiful tableau. She was letting the experience pass by unobserved, unnoticed. I am old enough to realize that there is only a finite number of such moments in a lifetime and each one needs to be seized before it flitters off forever. I wanted to drag her back into the immediate present, to make her see perfection before it was lost.

Once the meaning of the scene emerged, it was fairly easy to turn the hodgepodge of words on the pages of my notebook into something more meaningful. After some experimentation and many rewrites, they coalesced to form this poem:

Driving to work, the air fresh and clear after
a drizzly night.
The sky is blue and clean, grass sparkles
as the sun washes the world in morning light.
I round the corner to face an ancient oak
filled with bright yellow leaves.
Underneath, bathed in the warm back-light
of the tree stands a
woman/child.
Simply dressed in stone washed jeans and
long sleeve white t-shirt
soft dark hair circles her face,
dark ovals for eyes
clear, unblemished skin.

She is perfect in every way.

To the woman/child, though, it is just a
perfectly ordinary morning,
one in a series of cookie-cutter days.
She thinks the sun will shine like this
everyday,
the mighty oak will last forever,
the skin will always be unblemished.

But there are those of us who know better.
We know there will never be another
morning
quite like this one,
that the mighty oak that has stood its place
for a hundred years
may be gone tomorrow,
the unblemished skin will crack and wrinkle,
the hair will stiffen and turn gray,
the flat stomach will sag and form paunches
around the hips.

I have an urge to grab her and
drag her into this very moment
to see the world as it is and
to use this morning to judge all others.

Writer's notebooks can also be used in the classroom as a way to make students more observant of the world around them. I start by gathering together books that excel in descriptive writing and saturating my students in the rich, detailed language of these master writers. Picture books work especially well for this purpose because I can bring a wide variety of styles and authors into my classroom in a relatively short time. The clear, sharp prose in a well-written picture book serves as an excellent model for students to emulate. Marion Dane Bauer's *When I Go Camping with Grandma* contains these gems of descriptive writing:

> *The sun grows flat and red as it dips into the edge of the lake. . . . The moon floats low in the bluing sky like a balloon left from a night party.* (Bauer, 1995, pp. 15 and 23)

Ann Turner's fine book of poems, *A Moon for All Seasons* (1994) personifies the procedure I want my fourth-grade students to follow. She goes out into the world, finds one of those small miracles of life that would normally slip by unnoticed and unappreciated, observes it closely, then captures it on paper in words and images so sharp they cut like a knife to the essence of a scene. Feast on the poems "Taste Sky" and "Winter Moon" to catch a taste of her writing style:

The sky empties
buckets of snow
feathery as small wings.
I lie on my back and watch
them falling, feel them
falling, and taste sky
on my tongue.

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Someone has been polishing
that moon, whirring it
on a grind stone until
it is sickle sharp.
The sky hurts
where the moon touches it.

As a class, we put fine examples such as these under the microscope and examine them carefully. I make copies of other prime examples of descriptive writing such as Pam Conrad's *Prairie Song* and have students underline words and phrases that appeal to the five senses and color-code them according to each sense — words that appeal to the sense of smell underline in blue, the sense of sight in green, and so on. I will also read aloud passages from well-written books such as the first chapter of Farley Mowat's *Owls in the Family* (1981) while my students have their eyes closed. Mowat's lyrical description of the Canadian prairie creates vivid, sharp mental pictures in students' minds. They will then translate their mental images into a picture on paper.

Collecting Scenes

The purpose of these activities is to get kids to see the contrast between the relatively undetailed writing we often use and the rich language needed to bring a scene alive. After completing the process described above, we are now ready to go out into the world and capture a piece of the world in our writer's notebook. On a nice day, with the sun shining and the birds chirping, we go outside and find a spot on the school grounds where we can record our sensory perceptions. Each in our own place, we record what is happening around us, using clear, sharp prose as the world comes to us through our five senses. A page from one of my notebooks harvested these images:

I see the sun peeking through a thick layer of gray clouds.

I feel a gentle wind, heavy with moisture blow across my face. It brings the sweet smell of grass with it.

In the distance, a bird chirps—short, staccato sounds.

Another calls sadly, wailing into the wind like a newborn baby.

A man gets out of a truck and starts a saw—a harsh burst of sound, like a swarm of angry bees.

On the other side of the pine trees are the soccer fields. They stand alone, empty, waiting for the soccer season to begin and the thrill of children's feet tickling its back.

I walk across the playground. The ground is soft and spongy and squeaks as I walk.

The smell of pine fills the air. The small skinny trunks of the pines sway in the breeze, their needles flowing in the direction of the wind. Pine cones and needles litter the aisles between the neat rows of trees.

This process emphatically demonstrates to students one of the powers of the writer's notebook. Very quickly they develop the habit of collecting scenes and images that would otherwise slip by unobserved. In addition, my elementary students begin to feel the emotional impact of being more receptive to the world around them. On their own, they will meet during recesses and on weekends to capture more of their lives in their notebooks. Many of these ideas and images are later incorporated into poems and prose pieces.

Whether any ideas from my students' notebooks ever bloom into a serious piece of writing, however, is not important. Whether or not the poem that germinated in my notebook is an effective piece of writing worthy of being published doesn't matter, either. The mere act of writing it is the key. By keeping a writer's notebook, my students and I have learned that the process is more important then the product because it leads away from the distractions of life and toward the heart. Journals open up a window allowing us to learn new things about ourselves. Our journal observations that begin as snapshots can be developed into ideas that make meaning of experience.

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Peterson's Credo

BY ALINA SIVORINOVSKY

The email was addressed to the National Writing Project in Berkeley: "Did the Art Peterson your Web site lists as an NWP staff member teach English at Lowell High School in the 1980s?"

Alas, in the virtual world there is no place to hide. Luckily, in this case, I was not trying to disappear. Rather I had a chance to reconnect with a former student, Alina Sivorinovsky, and to learn that she had moved from the Bay Area to New York City. She was now a wife and mother who had written for television and published several romance novels and a nonfiction book on ice skating. She learned that I had retired from teaching and was now happily ensconced as a publications editor at NWP.

In the course of our electronic conversations, she happened to mention "Peterson's Credo." Peterson's what? I had no idea the little stabs and jabs of writing advice I had foisted on my students would be translated into anything as weighty as a credo. As it turns out, this so-called credo was a little helpful hint I had tailored for Alina. Looking back, I realize I may have been a rich font of credos: one for every student. For those who might think this particular credo is a little — well — banal, understand that an aging teacher's banality may sometimes, for a 17-year-old, approach wisdom.

—Art Peterson

Once upon a time, I rambled. I rambled when I talked, I rambled when I thought, and, most unfortunately, I rambled when I wrote. Which meant that I had a tendency to begin writing a sentence without any idea of how I intended for it to end, or even what I intended it to convey. The sensual and cerebral thrill was in the starting, not the finishing. And it made for some very . . . original sentences. Ones that featured a minimum of six clauses and ran the length of a double-spaced sheet of binder paper.

That's the writer I was in Art Peterson's AP English class at Lowell High School in 1986. (I was also cocky and full of myself, but that, I think, Mr. Peterson could handle. After all, I was seventeen years old, and I suspect I wasn't the only senior class member who thought I knew it all). He left the cocky alone. But the tendency to ramble while writing, Mr. Peterson tried to fix.

He lobbed a lot of wisdom our way over the course of two semesters. One pearl that stuck with me was his attempt to focus my long-winded rambling: "Just think about what you want to say, and say it."

So concise. So pithy. So clear. And, after twelve years of obscure grammar and composition lessons, so easy to follow.

I dubbed the advice, "Peterson's Credo," and have followed it ever since. For thirteen years, it's served me well.

The first book I ever got published, *The Fictitious Marquis*, a Regency Romance novel, was written under deadline, in three weeks of ten-hour days. Why the rush? Suffice it to say that, when an Avon editor called to say, "I loved your sample chapters, can I see the full manuscript on my desk Monday?" I told her, "But . . . it's — I . . . it's not . . . polished yet," rather than the truth, which would have been, "It's not written yet."

Needing to compose 180 pages in three weeks meant I had no time to ramble, and I had no time to start sentences whose point I hoped would be revealed to me by the time I stumbled to their end. That was why, before starting any scene, I took a moment to ask myself what the one-sentence point of it should be. I thought about what I wanted to say. And then I said it. (Sometimes, when I needed to pad, I said it several times).

"Peterson's Credo" also came in handy during the writing of my subsequent three novels and one nonfiction book. But it proved downright indispensable when I started writing for television. Because, while a novel or a nonfiction tome can forgive a digression or a brief off-topic ramble, television is brutal in its time constraints. Make your point, and make it quickly, because we're off the air in seventy seconds.

In other words: Think about what you want to say. And say it.

Clearly, concisely, and directly.

Then stop.

Alina Sivorinovsky's most recent novel, When a Man Loves a Woman, *(under the pen name Alina Adams) was an April 2000 release from Dell/Bantam.*

How Did You Do That?

The Secrets of Strong Writers

BY DEAN SMITH

For more than a decade, I've been helping my students discover the processes they use when composing. I teach them that these processes are individual, flexible, and recursive, but involve some basic components, including prewriting, drafting, feedback, revision, and editing. I demonstrate my writing processes, which include choosing topics that are interesting to me, sipping a cup of coffee or tea, wandering the room to think, making lists, scratching off listed items as I write, rearranging paragraphs and ideas, and finally asking colleagues I trust to read and respond to my work.

As a writing project teacher, I've long believed that knowledge of writing processes helps students write better texts, but I had never tested this idea. I decided to perform a classroom-based research project to examine this theory. I started with this question: Does knowledge of writing processes improve the quality of written products?

The study, conducted over the course of an entire school year, was performed in a rural school district in Central Pennsylvania. I worked with approximately 120 heterogeneously grouped ninth-grade students whose reading levels spanned the entire ability continuum.

First, I asked students to write to a prompt I provided, and, after writing, to reflect on their writing processes. I then analyzed the students' reflections as well as the quality of their written products to determine whether knowledge of writing processes helped them produce better texts.

The Prompt

The following thought-provoking text — a letter written by a teacher who had been doing some soul-searching — became the initial writing prompt. My students and I defined and discussed the difficult vocabulary in the letter, and then we read it out loud together.

> *To whom it may concern:*
>
> *I have taught in high school for ten years. During that time I have given assignments, among them, to a murderer, an evangelist, a pugilist, a thief, and an imbecile.*
>
> *The murderer was a quiet little boy who sat on the front seat and regarded me with pale blue eyes; the evangelist, easily the most popular boy in the school, had the lead in the junior play; the pugilist lounged by the window and let loose at intervals with a raucous laugh that startled even the geraniums; the thief was a gay-hearted Lothario with a song on his lips; and the imbecile, a soft-eyed little animal seeking the shadows.*
>
> *The murderer awaits death in the state penitentiary; the evangelist has lain for a year in a country churchyard; the pugilist lost an eye in a brawl in Hong Kong; the thief, by standing on tiptoe, can see the windows of my room from the county jail; and the once gentle-eyed little moron beats his head against the padded wall in the state asylum.*
>
> *All these pupils once sat in my room, sat and looked at me gravely across worn brown desks. I must have been a great help to these pupils — I taught them the rhyming scheme of the Elizabethan sonnet and how to diagram a complex sentence.*
>
> *Naomi Hohn White*
> *Stillwater High School*
> *Stillwater, OK*

After we read the letter together, I asked my students to write a response. But there was a hitch. I also told them that, as they wrote, I wanted them to sit back and examine their own writing processes:

> *After reading the above letter, I would like you to respond to it in writing. When I say respond, I don't necessarily mean write a letter back. I want you to respond to it in writing as you might respond to any other piece of literature or news story or movie or incident that causes you to reflect. What does it make you think about? How does it make you feel? Your response may take any form (a journal entry, a letter, a poem, a stream-of-consciousness reaction, etc.). While you write your response, take note of the things that you do as a writer. What strategies do you use? How do you go about it? What do you notice about the way you write? On a separate piece of paper, write about how you write.*

I used the letter responses to gather reflections on writing, and I later used the reflections as an inductive way to teach the writing process and as a springboard for talking about successful writing habits.

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I kept my students' responses to the letter and their self-analyses of their writing processes until later in the year, when I had seen enough compositions to identify my stronger and weaker writers. At that point, I went back and reexamined what they had said about their own processes.

Processes of Weak Writers

When I looked at the students' responses to White's letter, I found that the weaker pieces of writing were short and poorly developed. They exhibited a lack of focus and/or organization, indicating little or no prewriting. Weaker pieces tended to ramble without any clear direction; some even contained random sentences copied from the letter. They also suffered from stylistic problems, such as poor word choice and sentence structure, as well as many mechanical errors that sometimes interfered with the reader's comprehension of the piece. These problems can be seen in the following responses to White's letter:

My respons to this is that the teacher was the falt of these people Im not sure why but that is wat I feel. The teacher must not have tought them anything.

****

I don't know how to write to you or to any one about this letter but I feel like the lady that wrote it was friends with one or all of them. The lady was like a doll not to say what she meant but to write it down so that she did not hurt the people she know but in a way she played a big part in each of there lives. It reminds me of a poem I read a long time ago about a women with a big problem and killed her self to save her self. So don't ask me about a women with a five bad people in her class when she should be talking about her self.

****

The murderer was quiet little boy who sat in front seat & regarded me with pale blue eyes. the evangelist, most poular boy in school had the lead in the junior play. the pugilist lounged by the window & let loose at intervals w/a raucous laugh that strated even the geraniums. The thief was gay-hearted Lothario w/a song on his lips. & the imbecile softeye animal seeking shadows.

Most of these underdeveloped pieces were written by students who did little, if any, prewriting. They thought very little about the topic and used no apparent strategies for generating ideas and putting those ideas into some kind of order. After I heard my students read orally and examined their performance on a standardized reading test, I noticed another connection: the better readers were also better writers, a finding that should surprise no one.

After identifying the weaker writers, based on their responses to White's letter as well as other written work during the semester, I examined what these writers noticed about their own writing processes. Many of these students seemed to think very little about their processes, as evidenced by the brevity of their self-analyses:

I don't write to good but when I start writing I just want to go on and on. I write to many run-on sentences. I can't write to dang good cause I don't know how to set it up.

When I write sentence by sentence my letter might have no order as soon as I get a idea I write it. I am writing left handed. My hand hurts after wrting 3 sentences so my writing is bad then.

I write very weird. Half the time I don't know what I write about I just write down stuff that I think of.

My writing is very slopy. That is usualy how I write when I am writing my thoughts. I misspell a lot of words. It's very slopy. I think its too boring. I don't do my paragraphs right. I some of my wiritng I don't use paragraphs at all.

Based upon these and many other responses, I started to look for commonalities among my weaker writers. One of the first telltale problems I discovered was that some of my students had a very limited understanding of what writing is. Some of the weaker writers tended to think that the main purpose of writing was clear penmanship: "I write as a writer usually in cursive, because it is neater then my print." Another student added, "I am not a very good writer. My handwriting is really bad."

A second problem I discovered was that many students do not take care to find a quiet place to read or write. TV and other distractions may interrupt students' concentration, resulting in a loss of continuity. One of my weaker writers claimed, "I like writing when in my bedroom watching TV before I go to bed. That's when I'm the most relaxed and I can concentrate on what I'm doing." On the other hand, Darcy, one of my stronger writers, pointed out that he must "go someplace quiet (probably my room). I

can't have too many distractions, or I lose my train of thought."

A third problem: Weaker writers do not start with a specific idea or point that they want to make. Rather than beginning with a good idea, they tend to focus on the particulars of writing and lose sight of any overall purpose. "Every time I write I go word by word trying to think about what to write next," said one student. On the other hand, stronger writers are so intent on getting their message out that they tend to skip words, leave spaces, or just draw a line if they cannot think of the right word or phrase. Once the main ideas have been sketched out, they go back and try to fill in the missing blanks.

Processes of Strong Writers

Just as I identified weak writers, I also identified stronger writers based on their responses to Smith's letter, as well as other written work. Good writing tended to include several characteristics:

- a clear, consistent focus on a topic without many digressions
- more developed ideas with plenty of details
- sentence variety
- that elusive quality called "voice," through which authors reveal a little something about themselves in their writing, and
- fewer mechanical errors that get in the way of comprehension.

Rebecca's response and analysis, below, provide an example of strong writing. In the first part, she takes on the voice of Naomi Hohn White, the teacher who wrote the moving letter. Then Rebecca takes on the voice of one of White's former students. Finally, she returns to the voice of White, who concludes by reminding us that we're not just teachers of English but also teachers of children.

If you could see the future, bad moments and all, what would you do to stop them? Sadly, the future is not ours to see. So we must do all that we can now. When I look across the sea of face in my tenth grade classroom, I can never spot the ones who will make bad choices later on in life. After teaching for more than ten years, I have learned an important lesson – if I care for and give each student the attention and love that every child deserves; if I teach them about right and wrong; then I have given them a more valuable gift then has ever been attained through sentence diagramming. I give them the gift of life. Of love. And most of all, a promising future. I just wish I had know this sooner. The journal entry below, written by one of my former students, will show you what I mean.

****

Joshua Whitmore, September 18, 1998

Tomorrow is my big day. No, not the day that I graduate, the day I get married — not even the day I get my first paycheck or get promoted. Tomorrow is the day I die.

I didn't mean to do it. Well, at the time I did, but now, oh! how I regret it! Yet, the fact remains — I am a murderer.

I don't want to die. I'm afraid to die. Oh, God, let me live one more day of freedom! What does it feel like when you die? Where do you go? I wish someone — anyone, would tell me! Or could tell me. But no. No one cares about the loner. No one pays attention.

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Maybe that's why I went so far. For attention. And now, I hate myself for it. This is certainly not the kind of attention I once wished for.

If only someone had told me when I was young. Told me about choices — and consequences. All that time spent in school, learning about proper grammar and stuff — what's it to me now? If even just one person had helped me, maybe things would be different.

Tomorrow is my big day — I wish I had known.

.....

If you give the people around you the gift now, just think of what you could prevent later. Don't just preach. Don't just teach. Reach out.

Rebecca's creative response demonstrates her willingness to take risks. This piece also illustrates that she has a sense of audience. Both of these qualities allow her to develop her voice, which comes through again in her analysis of how she writes as a writer:

An analysis of how I write. Hmm. Well, this is a prime example. When I write, I always go through a long brainstorming stage. Usually I have a topic in mind, but I never start to write until I know exactly how I'm going to go about it. I think of different statements I would like to use, and lay the whole story out in my mind. Oh, that's another thing. Usually, I end up turning my free-lance writing assignments into stories or journal entries. Since I love history, I enjoy taking my knowledge of different time periods, combining them with a fictional character in my head, and creating journals and tales about their lives. Many times I'll write stories about how I wish my life would be. The nice thing about those is that since I created them, I can destroy them. What I mean by that is, my stories are so real to me, I begin to think, "Gee, I wish I could live like that!" and lose sight of the fact that my life is pretty good as it is. So I add some not-so-perfect aspects to my character's life and think, "Gee, I've got a really great life." These situations also make my stories more believable. Hey, let's face it — no one's life is perfect.

When I write, I usually just sit down at my computer, turn on some great tunes, and let it flow out of me. Once in a while for school assignments I'll write a rough draft, but I've become very computer reliant in the past few years. I'm still not sure if that is a good thing.

I could write about how I write forever, but I would rather be reading. (Hey, it's how I get many of my idea!) How do you close a writing analysis paper? Uhh, I hope that you enjoyed this example of my brain on overload.

Rebecca's response and self-analysis reveal a number of insights. First, she spends time prewriting, which, for her, involves "a long brainstorming stage." She generates "different statements" or points she wants to make and then "lay[s] the whole story out." Even though she says she creates rough drafts only "once in a while for school assignments," the fact that she is composing on the computer may indicate that she actually drafts as she writes, since composing on the computer makes the writing process more fluid. Most writers who make use of word processing draft and edit as they go; these are not distinctly different stages but rather a continuous process. It might also be noted that, as with many good writers, she is an avid reader, which is where she "get[s] many of [her] ideas!" These general patterns were also found in the responses of many of the stronger writers.

Knowledge of the writing process helped my better writers in a number of ways. First, contrary to weaker writers, stronger writers spent more time thinking about or talking about their topic. A number of students discussed the assignment with their parents, talking about everything from what constitutes effective teaching to where they and their peers may end up in the future. Those conversations were a crucial part of their writing processes.

Justin pointed out the importance of taking time to think about what you're going to say:

When I am writing the first thing I do is read then follow the directions in my assignment to make sure that I am writing what It asks me. Then I stop, sit, and think about what I am going to write and how I am going to format it.

While he goes on to detail his process, he makes an insightful Freudian slip of sorts:

Then I start writing and every once and a wail I stop and make sure that what I am writing makes senses and it tells how I fill. Then when I am done writing about the topic I stop and make sure that there are no spelling or

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punctuation mistakes. Then I read it one last time and make sure it captures everything I want to say.

As Justin reveals, good writing is hard work. Many authors have come to spots in their writing where they have had to stop and pull their hair out in frustration, even if it's "every once in a wail."

In addition to talking about their writing assignment, many of the stronger writers made use of various prewriting techniques, such as listing, webbing, tree diagramming, or outlining. Carrie said, "When I write I start by 'brainstorming' ideas first then I put ideas together to form a rough draft."

Better writers attempt to list their main points or ideas and then put them in some kind of logical order. This skeleton doesn't have to take the form of the traditional outline. It merely needs to provide the writer with a sketch of what to say and in what order to say it. Pam commented:

When I write I have to think about what I'm going to say first. Sometimes I get a lot of ideas and organize them in my head and then write them down. Sometimes I make webs and cross things off but most of the time I just start writing and then check it.

Stronger writers tended to have a better handle on the overall writing process, as revealed by Kali's very insightful list of what she goes through when writing a piece:

1. Dread and complain about the paper.
2. Think about my intro. paragraph.
3. jot down some ideas
4. Write 1st draft
edit myself
then get mom, dad, sister to edit
5. 2nd then Final Draft.

Good writers tend to revise as they write. Jonathan said, "I just edit on the computer as I type. As I read over it, I look for more exact descriptions." Being one of my more mature writers, he went on to explain how he experiments with sentence variety: "Last, but not least, I like to be creative with my sentence variation. Sometimes I come up with variations that don't exist!"

Steph was one of the few student writers who was not only aware of the process, but illustrated an understanding of audience:

As a writer I brainstorm ideas. Whether they are for a poem, a diary, a letter or any piece of writing. I just attempt to sequence the thoughts in a order that would fit the audience, if it be anyone or myself. I usually try to put the words in a fashion that would be understood by whomever. A type of diagram, an intro, a basic center, and conclusion is what I've hopefully jotted down … Sometimes writing has no exact for[m] whatsoever.

Her last comment about form is particularly insightful. Authors write for a purpose. They have a heartfelt point that they feel needs to be passed on to their audience. The form of the writing takes a back seat to the actual purpose. Hence the expression "form follows function." However, good writers are conscious of the different models available to them. Kara makes use of a tried-and-true form: "I usually use about 4 different paragraphs and an introductory and conclusion."

Most good writers go through some kind of editing once they feel they start closing in on a final draft. Scott writes:

I then read through it to see if there are any corrections that need to be made. After completing the search for corrections I write the final draft. When the final draft is done I read it again and have someone else read it to see if I need anything corrected or if I missed something in the first place.

As with many of the better writers, Scott made use of editors who have a vested interest in his writing. "My parents usually proofread my writing assignments before I hand it in."

My research shows that good writers have a significant other to whom they take their work. My better classroom writers have designated someone to read their work and to give them feedback. They have apparently learned that good friends do not make good respondents.

Good writers tended to have a better handle on the overall writing process, while weaker writers tend to "short sheet" the process. In fact, many of the problems that students seem to have are related to the process. Pieces that lacked development or that lacked a clear direction tended to be written by students who did not make good use of prewriting. Papers that had many stylistic problems or mechanical errors were written by students who did not conference or did not perform any kind of self-edit.

Teaching Applications

As a result of my research, I have modified the way I coach my students through a piece of writing. My job is not to tell them what to write, but to help them find something to write about. My better writers think before they write. Now I usually begin a writing assignment with a brainstorming session. For narratives, we brainstorm memories of events. With expository writing, we conjure up topics and issues of concern to the students.

I introduce different types of prewriting. Many students already know something about semantic mapping or webbing, a technique taught in the elementary grades; however, they don't develop their webs enough to organize their ideas. They generate a central topic and then run a mass of lines willy-nilly across the page, linked at the end to an idea that is often only tangentially related to the main topic. I take time to teach them how to cluster ideas and how to subordinate, coordinate, and superordinate topics and subtopics. I introduce tree diagrams, graphic organizers, and lists as other forms of prewriting that can be used in addition to a traditional outline. I have found that I must treat prewriting as a tangible step and require students to use one of the techniques shared in class. Otherwise, they'll return to freewriting as their only tool for initiating a piece.

My research shows that good writers have a significant other to whom they take their work. My better classroom writers have designated someone to read their work and to give them feedback. They have apparently learned that good friends do not make good respondents. I now require each of my students to take their writing to someone they trust for feedback— usually an older brother or sister or a parent who is able to give the critical feedback needed but present it in a loving way. This has been a valuable tool.

I sometimes give students a list of questions to help them focus their feedback, to drop their guards, and give each other meaningful feedback in peer response groups. For example, I might ask the following:

1. What do you find interesting about the title; why does it draw you in?
2. What is interesting about the introduction; does it draw you in? How can it be improved?
3. What is the thesis statement? Is it clear and concise? Does it take a specific stand?
4. Does the piece provide a minimum of three arguments? How could the arguments be improved?
5. Are transitional words used (first, second, third, additionally, etc.)?

I also offer input before a student ever turns in a piece to be evaluated, meeting with the students one-on-one and providing comments to them on the pieces that they've selected to take to a final draft. As I read the piece, I ask questions about things I don't understand, but I also provide suggestions pertaining to content and structure. If the student wants me to, I'll also identify errors related to grammar and mechanics. In fact, I don't have to put many comments on my students' papers any longer, because I've already made most of my comments during our conferences.

Finally, I make sure students self-edit. During our conferences, I have them keep track of the grammatical problems we've discussed. We create a checklist recording the words they tend to misspell, their problems with mechanics, and so on. Before they submit their final drafts, I have them read their papers aloud to themselves, a practice that helps them pick up awkward phrasing, missing words, and subtle nuances that might otherwise be overlooked. They then use their checklists to do a final scan for errors or for structural problems.

My use of these teaching strategies arose out of my research, as well as my examination of my own habits as a writer. By taking a close look at my students' habits, I was able not only to identify those strategies used by strong writers, but to make sure that some of these habits were incorporated into any writing instruction for all my students.

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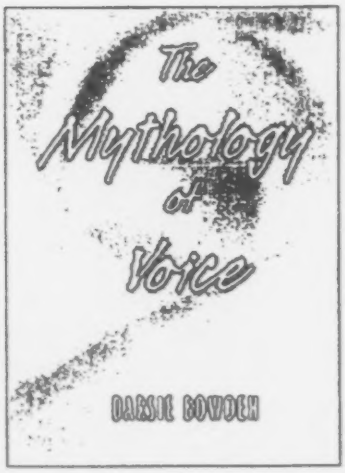
Books

The Mythology of Voice

BY DARSIE BOWDEN
Boynton/Cook, 1999. $21.00; 149 pages.

REVIEWED BY MONIE HAYES



Have you ever commended a student for his or her use of voice in a written composition? Perhaps, like me, you've pencilled the compliment in the margin of the student's work. Using the metaphor of voice to describe style, expression, and energy in a text is common practice, but in her new book, *The Mythology of Voice* (Boynton/Cook, 1999), Darsie Bowden suggests that the metaphor has outlived its usefulness.

It's a provocative proposition. Western culture values individual authorial presence in a text. Such an approach limits our pedagogy as well as our thinking, according to Bowden, in no small measure because the term "voice" is nebulous, its meaning and manifestation hard to illustrate to students with sufficient precision.

Bowden, an associate professor of English at Western Washington University, writes that prevalent contemporary attitudes about voice are rooted in the classical definition of ethos. She rehearses poststructuralist theory, with its revelation that self is not stable and language is a slippery tool. She believes that these constructs lead us away from the very authenticity writing teachers schooled in the legacy of Peter Elbow strive to cultivate in their classrooms and to encourage students to cultivate in their texts.

Bowden's recounting of the literary theories that have sustained the voice metaphor illustrates that it has always been a problematic term, grounds for contestation, since the shift from an oral to a literate society. She calls upon the work of Jaques Derrida, who attributes our insistence on locating voice within a discursive performance to a "phonocentric" orientation, a desire to attribute language to a composer, a wish for proximity with that integrated self. She draws upon Michel Foucault's (you can't have Derrida without Foucault) theory to point out that any author we might locate is positioned rhetorically and that such positions are not constant.

Using the metaphor of voice to describe style, expression, and energy in a text is common practice, but … Darsie Bowden suggests that the metaphor has outlived its usefulness.

Bowden cautions that it is our insistence on persona that has led to an "emphasis on personal expression with the concomitant devaluation of 'boring, academic writing'" (p. 36). Perhaps, she suggests, such rhetorical fallout does not best serve our students — or our academic discourse. She further draws our attention to the Western, capitalistic preoccupation with property and ownership that has contributed to the longevity of voice as a metaphor for stylistic choice and authorial "presence." But we as writing teachers know our students not only as individuals, but also as hands holding hard copy and faces eager for our guidance.

Bowden's book is most productive — and fresher — when it looks forward rather than when it looks back. We have heard poststructuralist warnings regarding the complicated nature of the self (i.e., that it is not discretely and individually located, not essential, and not fixed). But her exploration of more contemporary theory to suggest more appropriate ways we might conceptualize voice is new.

She draws upon feminist theory and the phenomena of electronic authorship to offer new metaphors. "The web," "the embrace," and "the network" are more serviceable, and more authentic, images for the dynamics of composition. She writes that these frameworks allow students to appreciate text in context and, for instance, through the metaphor of the web in particular, to apprehend "the link between creator, environment, and materials." She points out that such an emphasis on links — on intersections — can enable student writers to become more attentive to craft and style,

— *continued on p. 40*

Books

Mosaic of Thought:

Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop

BY ELLIN OLIVER KEENE AND SUSAN ZIMMERMANN
Heinemann, 1997. $27.50; 255 pages.

REVIEWED BY SHERYL LAIN

"I write," says John Cheever, "to make sense of my life." *Mosaic of Thought* by Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman says we *read* for the same reason — to make sense of our lives. In the book, the authors show us reading workshops with real students where even the littlest ones are taught how to read for the love of it.

Reading research tells us that for students to grow a grade in their reading ability, they need to read something like a million words a year. Well, people large or small will not read that many words unless they figure out how to enjoy it.

Mosaic explains how to teach reading that way — so kids can see why it matters. No wonder whole buildings in my district are using the book for focused study.

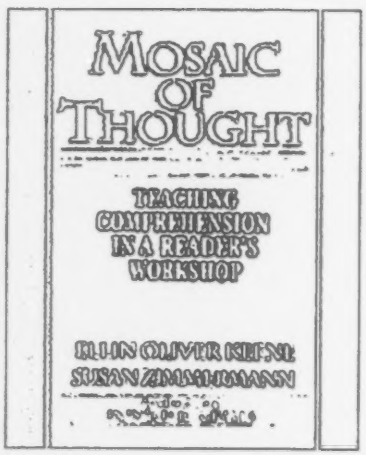
Keene and Zimmerman studied good readers by first studying themselves. What do their brains do as they read? What are the invisible mental acrobatics that make reading worth the trouble?

Focusing on one comprehension strategy at a time, each chapter shows us Keene's thoughts as she interacts with words on the page. Each chapter shows us classrooms where all the children read, ponder, remember, reread, and make new stories. The authors welcome us into their book groups where their colleagues talk about reading. They invite us to listen in as they talk about reading with their families. These glimpses into the minds of readers form a mosaic, each little ceramic tile placed together until readers of *Mosaic* form a meaningful picture of the whole reading process and seven comprehension strategies.

This is a show, don't tell, kind of book. It's also about how reading makes a clearer, richer life. And that's at the very heart of why we readers read anyway. We read to make sense of our experiences. Reading is thinking, and thinking is powerful stuff. I can picture Socrates, tapping his knee for emphasis, when he told his students, "the unexamined life is not worth living." That's how much Socrates valued thinking.

The bottom line in Mosaic of Thought *is that when good readers read, they are anything but passive couch potatoes. Reading is a mind journey.*

This book is about thinking our way through life and books. Besides a list of strategies, *Mosaic* offers the readers a picture of how a reading workshop should look and feel. Homey. Interactive. The air alive with ideas and questions. Taking a closer look between the lines of the text, the reader sees how exemplary teachers at all grade levels set up their rooms. Different places for different activities. A burnt orange chair out of someone's basement, a



Salvation Army floor lamp with the kid-painted lampshade, and a rug. These form a "living room" where students meet to hear the teacher read and reflect, where the whole class sits together and listens with wide-awake imaginations to texts of all kinds.

The teacher reads aloud and offers a short lesson on a comprehension strategy by modeling, showing the students what her mind is doing. Then the students go to their chairs or to the "den" and read. The teacher sits by one student after the other, asking them to show her in their own books how they're practicing the lesson she modeled.

These two structures, the teacher-led, whole-class lesson and the independent reading time, form the heart of the reading workshop. They're not the only structures, though. Students read in pairs, read with a younger child, read to discuss in book clubs, read to write, draw, or act. But the core of the reading workshop is built around

Mosaic of Thought:
Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop

teacher modeling and students practicing independently in books of their own choice.

What are the teacher-led comprehension lessons? The chapters of *Mosaic* show us one at a time. Each strategy must be taught — or modeled — with "singular focus over a long period of time to students from kindergarten through twelfth . . . with a variety of texts" (p. 21).

The authors invite us to try it ourselves. We need to read, slow down, watch what our mind is doing as we read. Then we'll discover what good readers do.

- We activate prior knowledge, our brain mixing our memories with the words on the page.
- We focus on the essential, the heart of the text. Our eyes even slow down a wee bit when we read the key words holding the main ideas.
- We ask questions constantly — of ourselves, the author, the text — to clarify.
- We create mental pictures, all the senses alive, including our emotions, as we remember.
- We make new interpretations from our inferences; replay what we've read, while shopping for avocados or walking the dog, until what we've read is our own memory.

The authors show us in vignette after vignette how to structure these strategies into classroom lessons.

The bottom line in *Mosaic of Thought* is that when good readers read, they are anything but passive couch potatoes. Reading is a mind journey. The text goes with us along the way, helping us make sense out of the stories of our lives.

Sheryl Lain is director of the Wyoming Writing Project.

Review: The Mythology of Voice

—continued from p. 38

rather than depending on some enigmatic wizard behind the screen to conjure up their words.

What's particularly successful is Bowden's own linking of the metaphors of feminism and the fluid, heteroglossic, and stylistic phenomena of technology. She demonstrates the ways in which electronic text subverts still-prevalent insistence on celebrating an individuated self, a voice present within the text. And particularly gratifying is that by moving beyond fashionable deconstruction to offer these alternative metaphors, Bowden gives practitioners new options for talking with students about their work and their experiences and decisions as writers and readers. Her argument that voice has outlived its usefulness as a metaphor does not foreclose continuing to encourage student writers to cultivate expressivism in their prose, to be attentive to matters of context, audience, and style.

That Bowden is making this case against voice is perhaps at once predictable and surprising. The theories that inform it have held sway in the academy for some time now, and it is good — useful — to see them linked to the language of the writing classroom as well as to Language with a capital L.

But while an ethos of individual expressivism has held sway in the composition classroom, some dedicated teachers might find Bowden's case unexpected. As Bowden illustrates, however, if we truly prize authenticity, perhaps we might consider again the conceptual framework that informs our celebration of students' "voices" and look beyond it in order to show students fresh ways they might approach the process and product of authorship.

Monie Hayes is a Ph.D. student in Language, Literacy and Culture in the division of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Iowa, where she teaches an undergraduate speech and writing course.

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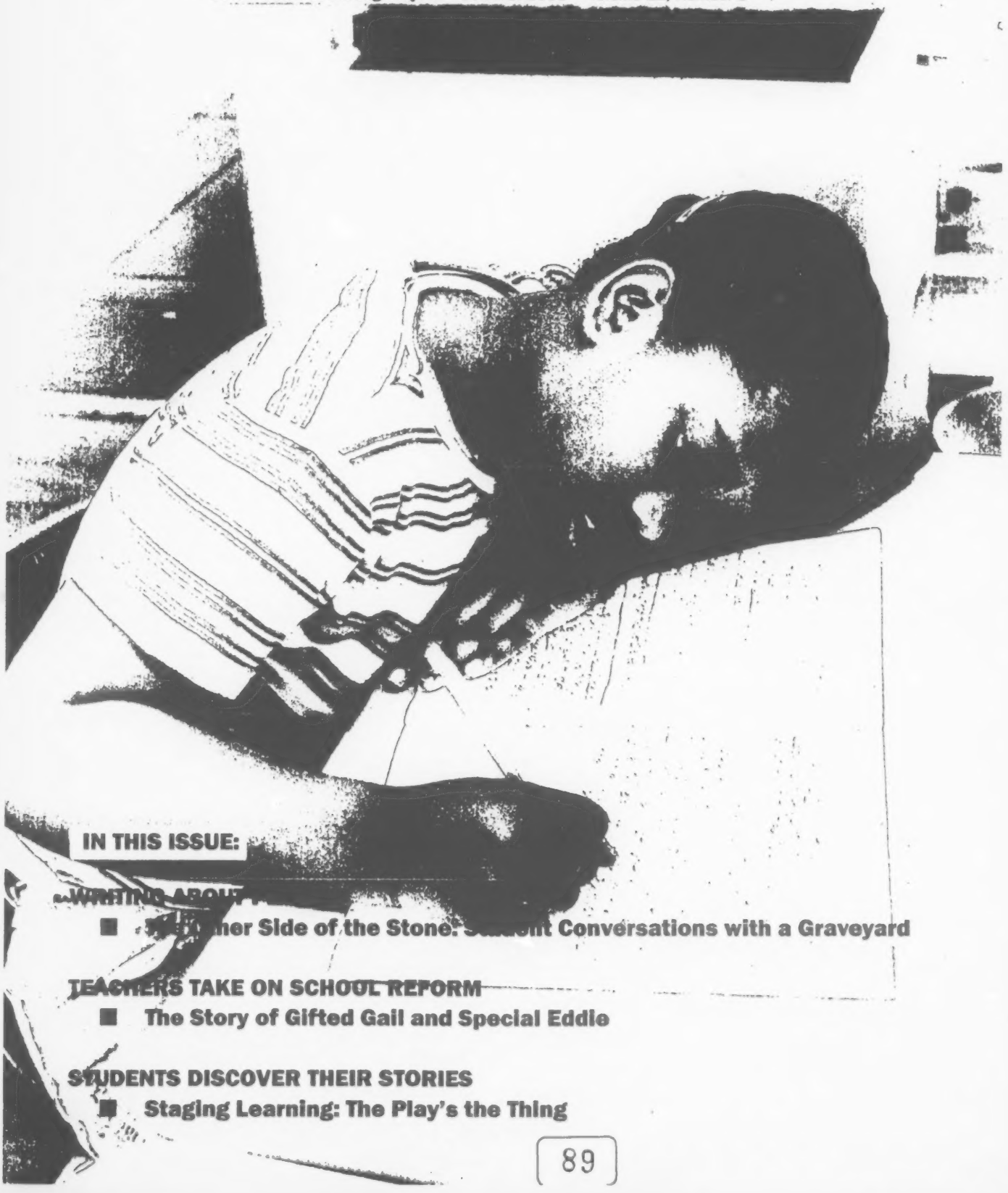

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Photos on cover and on pages 12, 16, and 28 by Elizabeth Crews. Crews's photos are representative of the ideas and not the particular individuals described in the accompanying articles. Photos on pages 6 and 7 by Patrick Pritchard. Photo on page 8 by Partain Photographers, Kerrville, Texas.

The Other Side of the Stone

Student Conversations with a Graveyard

Patrick C. Pritchard

Old cemeteries are what some theologians have called "thin" places—
places where the veil separating two worlds is translucent.
They are therefore rich in potential for student writing.

Imagine. A school as big as a county and safe from the effects of bad decisions made by men in suits and ties as they await their pensions.

Imagine. A classroom in this school that has a graveyard, a church, and a time machine (but no computer).

I taught in such a school. Oh, did I mention that God designed the building? Therefore its interior walls were not pale green concrete blocks. They were layer upon layer of forest and grassy hillside. The floor was never swept and the ceiling often leaked. The entire decor, both in color and form, changed with the passage of time, whether measured in seconds or seasons. This school is called the Upstate of South Carolina. It is a mountainous and piedmont area of the state that is one of the Appalachian region's best-kept secrets. Its rivers cascade southward bearing ancient names given to them by the Cherokee: Chattooga, Chauga, Toxaway, Tugaloo. It is home to a rare wild flower, the Oconee bell. It is not Charleston or Myrtle Beach. There are no T-shirts that celebrate its existence, yet its history is rich in the joys and tragedies of common folk. The whites who settled the area were Scots-Irish who drifted down the Appalachians from Pennsylvania, compelled by the restlessness of their Celtic past. Their descendents are still restless in their jacked-up four-wheel drive Confederate pickups. The few blacks were slaves of a handful of marginal plantations (the land is only moderately fertile and quite hilly). Blacks living in the Upcountry today are devout, conservative people who have often done a better job holding on to family values than their white neighbors.

One day while strolling the halls of my school, I came upon a mysterious old cemetery, hidden deep in the woods on the crest of a hill. A lifelong resident of the area had told me that there was an old slave burial ground here somewhere. I had found it. The site was large—about a half acre—and was roughly organized into crooked rows, so as not to contradict nature too much. Viewed from above, the rows of rough gravestones would have looked like a page of downward-sloping sentences that a third-grade boy might have written. Most of the graves were identifiable by elongated sunken areas from two to eight feet long and two to three feet wide. There were many trees among the graves. Some were pines fifty feet tall and more. An old roadbed meandered along the front and the faint, sunken shadow of an even older road curved around the end of the cemetery like a ghostly mother's arm clutching her children to her breast. There were no signs that a church building had ever been nearby. While almost all of the grave markers were simply fieldstones on edge, three of them were made from white marble with professional lettering. The stones were etched by weather and had moss and lichens growing on them. On one of them was a curious inscription that read:

Rev. Tenos Maxwell
Born 1818
Died
May 1, 1885
Husband of M. Maxwell
For 20 yrs a Baptist
Preacher
He died in full hope of
eternal Rest.

A shiver ran up my spine. This stone recalled a person who had a life before my great grandparents ever imagined me. The physical proof of his life lay six feet under my feet inexorably confirming sacred truth: *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.* I stood as a visitor in a congregation of spirits and lost liturgies. "If you're a visitor this morning please raise your hand and one of our ushers . . ." No. It was not like that here. I heard the clank of shovels against stone and the thud of earth being thrown on coffin lids. I imagined the wagon bearing the remains drawn by mules and the funeral procession of family and friends filling the woods and hollows with their songs of pain and joy.

Voices from the Past

In the weeks and months that followed, my students and I often went to the cemetery to meditate, and I always tried to conjure up the imagined scenes of the past. There was nothing morose or dark about my attraction to this spot. On the contrary, each time I went there I left with a powerful sense of peace and well-being. My students would urge me, "Man, we need to find out what this place is." Or, "Let's have school up here. This is the kind of shit I want to study. This is real stuff." "Yeah, I could dig that," another would reply. "Aw, sick man! You're really warped." My students were what some would call "rough."

A field trip to the local county courthouse informed us that Tenos Maxwell was a black man who was associated with the plantation owned by Samuel E. Maxwell. We also learned that after emancipation he had owned land in the vicinity of the cemetery. The few tidbits of information that we were able to discover served to convince us that Tenos Maxwell and his cemetery could serve as a centerpiece for a meaningful local history project for us. Besides, my students (in their own words) were "totally pumped" about the idea.

Fair Play Camp School is a residential therapeutic camping program for emotionally disturbed adolescent boys. The academic component of the program is experiential, thematic, and integrated across the curriculum. Every six weeks, a different theme is chosen and all the school subjects are taught through the theme. Could my students and I "hear" the story that this mysterious place had to tell? The therapeutic potential of this idea was appealing. I had for years used storytelling and an imaginative approach to history instruction as a way to elicit reflective attitudes in my students. I knew that the concept of "voices from the past" was a powerful one. So, it had come to this. Some special ed teachers burn out; I was now hearing voices.

My plan was to use archeological, historical, and ethnographic research methods to take my nine students on a journey into the local past. They simply wanted to satisfy their insatiable curiosity about a mysterious place. Mystery. Are there questions about mystery on the state-sponsored "prove-you're-teaching-the-brats-something-and-we'll-give-you-another-year's-fu[illegible]ing" tests?

Blake: Chief Pat [that's what they called me], tell the other guys what you told me about the stones talkin' and stuff. (We are sitting in the graveyard in a circle planning our project.)

Chief Pat: Guys, imagine if these stones could talk. What would they tell us?

Siggy: Man, they'd tell us stories that'd make our hairs stand on end!

Wes: Tears. Lots of tears and screamin'. Shit like that. Man, I went to a black funeral one time and a couple of ladies came unglued, like hollerin' and fallin' down and rollin' their eyes back in their heads. It was weird. You think that stuff went on here?

Chief Pat: Probably so. Life was hard for these folks. Death was never very far away. You guys still up for this?

Group: Yeah, let's do it man. This is *worth* learning.

The first phase of the project was to clear away the layers of fallen leaves and debris from the cemetery so that we could carefully examine the entire area. We were able to identify 118 gravesites, some with marker stones, some identifiable only by a sunken area in the ground. We also identified and documented 23 stones that had decipherable markings.

We spread shaving cream over stones thought to have inscriptions and when we smoothed the cream with a squeegee we were able to clearly see what was carved in the stones. Some of these had a surprising effect on us all. One in particular was grave number 92.

This grave had a granite slab about sixteen inches tall, with a rounded top that had obviously been carved to shape. When the shaving cream was applied, the inscription *JMC Feb 1 1885* stood out starkly in white against the gray of the stone. It had been carved quite deeply, so the letters and numbers were easily read. We marveled at its clarity. Then a couple of boys began to measure the distance between the headstone and footstone. It was forty-eight inches. The reality of what we had discovered made us fall silent . . . until one of the students spoke up. "This was just a kid." Another joined in, "I'm only a little taller than forty-eight inches." One by one, my students and I came to touch the inscrip-

The Other Side of the Stone

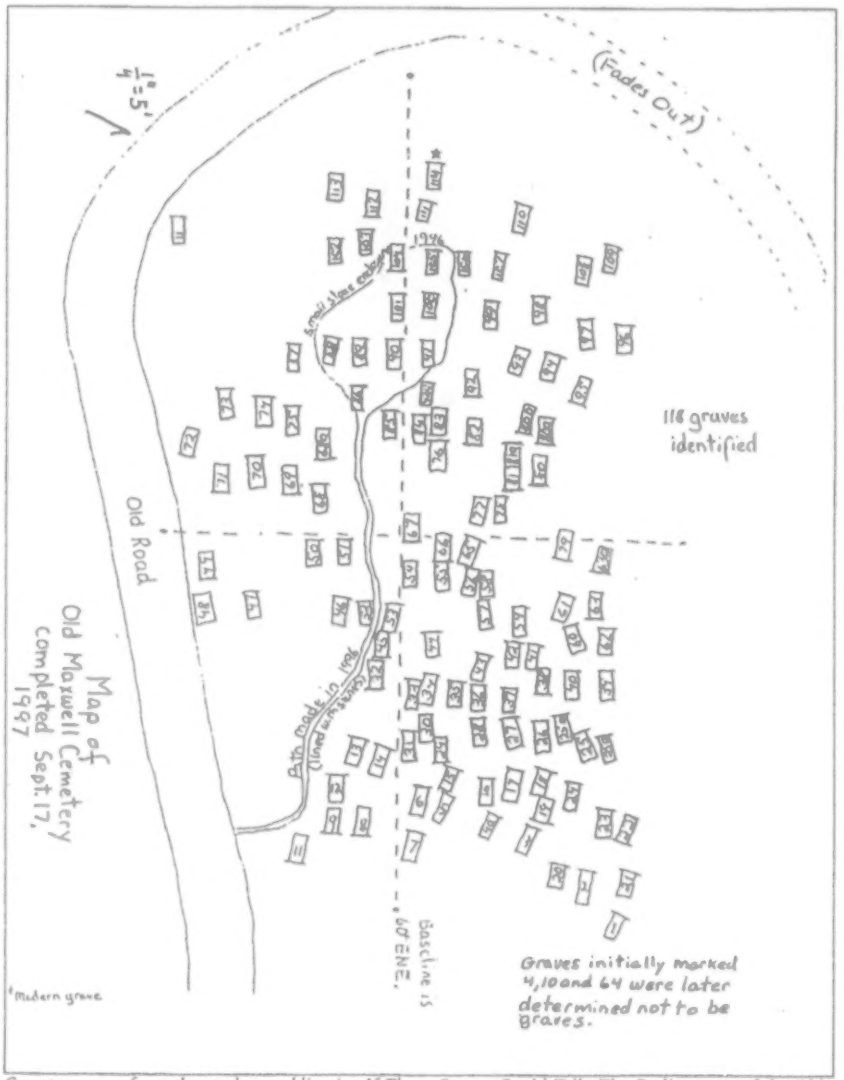
tion, no doubt lovingly carved by a grieving father or brother in order to make sure that this dear lost child would not be forgotten. As we ran our fingers over the letters and numbers, we all participated in that long-forgotten act of love, and we felt honored that we had recovered its memory. I recalled a similar experience when I first visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and ran my finger down a list of names until it stopped on the name of a dear friend. One of my students recorded the following thoughts in his journal at the end of the day:

> *One morning while we were identifying grave stones we came to grave number 92. We squirted shaving cream on the stone and when we squeegied it off, out came "JMC Feb 1 1885." The headstone was just a flat rock, but it was carefully carved into a nice shape. We measured the grave and it was only about four feet long. We concluded that this was a child's grave. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I started to feel bad for this person. I thought about how hard their life probably was. This person probably saw a lot of things that not many people have seen before. It made me feel pretty lucky.*

This young man's father had deserted him, his sister, and his mother when he was just an infant. He struggled daily with the injustice of this act. He understood the seeming injustice in the death of a child after a short life of hardship.

"Chief Pat, we need to go to the black church up the road. They gotta know about this place." The nearest African-American house of worship was New Promiseland Baptist Church. It was a tiny congregation comprised mainly of three or four extended families. I didn't know if any of these folks knew anything about the cemetery, but my students were eager to find out. We went to visit their deacon, Mr. Curtis Goodine.

One thing we found out right away was that Mr. Goodine was not going to automatically answer our questions about the cemetery just because we had good intentions. Our first visit convinced us that the only way for us to actually enlist the members of this congregation was to earn their trust. "Hear now. Y'all come to revival meetin's and I b'lieve y'all'l find some folks what knows somethin' about that ol' graveyard." The summer revival started the next Thursday. We said that by all means, we would be there.


Map of Old Maxwell Cemetery completed Sept. 17, 1997
Old Road
(Fades Out)
116 graves identified
Graves initially marked 4, 10 and 64 were later determined not to be graves.
Baseline is 60° ENE.
* Modern grave

Cemetery map from the student publication If These Stones Could Talk: The Rediscovery of the Old Maxwell Cemetery.

The meeting room was built to hold about fifty or sixty people. As my nine students, their two counselors, and my family walked in, we found ourselves in the midst of at least one hundred worshipers (all black). We were seated as a group (several folks were made to move to make room for us). We looked (and felt) very *white* in that room. Even my one black student was nervous having to be in there with this group of white people. We fidgeted and sang and observed and all of a sudden the minister, Reverend Sloan, was calling to us. "Brother Pat Pritchard. Don't you and your students from the camp have a song for us?" It was not really phrased as a question. It was expected. "Amen, yes! Give us a song, brother!" We all looked at each other. One of the boys suggested the song, "I Want Us to Be Together in Heaven." Everyone nodded in assent. At least we all knew it.

You may have a fancy car, brand new house that shines by far
You may live to be a hundred years old
But if you have not been saved, it all ends with the grave.
But I want us to be together in heaven.

I noticed that we seemed to be singing in at least three different keys at the same time. However, we were getting some serious sounding amens. It felt good.

I want us to be together in heaven
I want to walk down the streets of pure gold
I want to run through the fields of green clover
See the mansions, smell the flowers,
Hear the singing, it's all ours
See the river gently flowing,
Feel the gentle breezes blowing,
I want us to be together in heaven.

I looked around and noticed that several people had their handkerchiefs out dabbing at their eyes. A woman held her hand high, waving it back and forth, and shouted, "YES, Lord!" As we completed our obligatory song, I realized that we had unknowingly conveyed the message that the New Promiseland folks (and all folks) wanted to hear. The message was: *We accept you. We value you.*

One of my students exclaimed upon being handed a copy of the book he helped to write, "I came here to work on my problems and now I'm an author."

The New Promiseland Family

From that night on we were adopted members of the New Promiseland family. People came to us and volunteered information about the Maxwell Cemetery, or gave us names of people who could help us with our study. In addition to this, we were treated as honored guests every time we went to church there, which was often. I was looking for affective student responses from this project. Once New Promiseland became a partner, we were in an affective gold mine. They made the lives of the people buried in the cemetery have current meaning. Tenos Maxwell was like Reverend Sloan or Mr. Goodine. Three white students wrote the following comments on their relationship with New Promiseland:

Something that actually made a big impression on me was going to New Promiseland Church. I was at first very scared. Everyone else around me was black and I felt out of place, but the people at the church made me feel welcome. Their style of worship was different than anything I've ever seen.

I guess it was! He was Jewish. One day he would be ready to fight you if he thought you didn't respect his ethnicity; the next day he would be drawing swastikas on his arm and making anti-Semitic jokes.

New Promiseland was the best African American church I have been to. They have a great choir. Their choir sounds very good. Their preacher, Reverend Sloan, preaches really good sermons that make you think about how precious life is. They have a small congregation, but they really know how to praise the Lord.

This student was the scapegoat of the group. He had no sense of rhythm and was tone deaf. He had a great time at New Promiseland, but he looked so white when he sang and clapped his hands that it embarrassed the rest of the group.

I enjoyed going to New Promiseland Church. I had never been to a black church but I really felt loved. All of the people there were really nice and would probably do anything for us. That is what I really liked about the whole thing.

This boy had the greatest capacity for love and sensitivity. Trouble was, he was also a master thief. He was put in jail while on a home visit and was not able to come back to camp.

Another student wrote about a recurring dream he had after our visit to New Promiseland:

I've been having this dream for one week and three days. I had a dream that there was a black lady weeping in front of the Rev. Tenos Maxwell's grave. I always see her as if I was right on top of Liza Maxwell's grave. She is always

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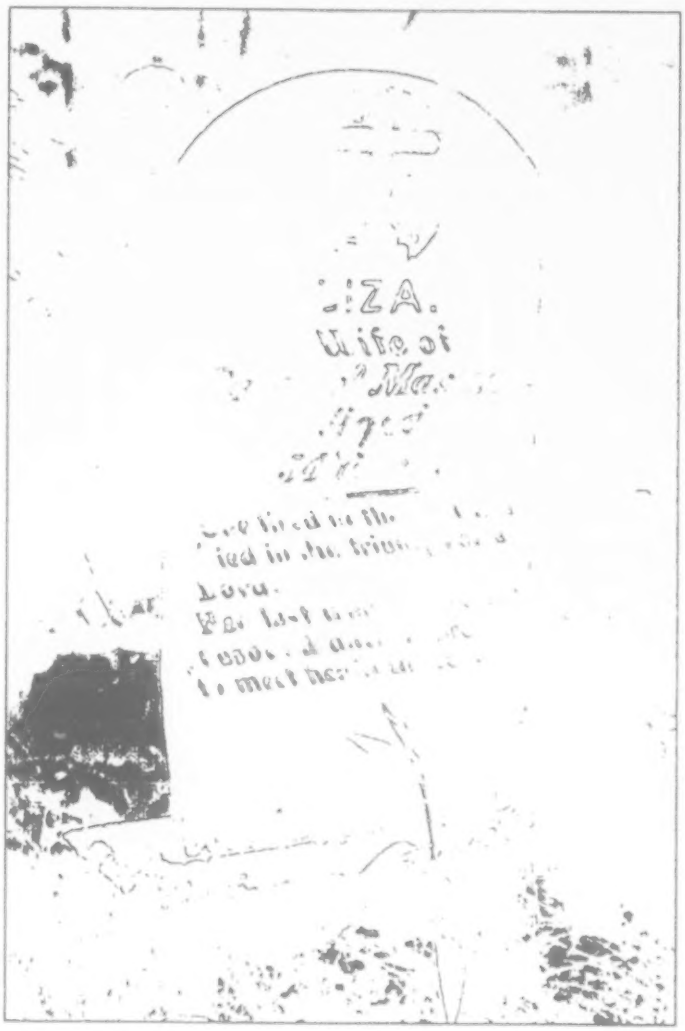
very clear in my mind when I wake up. She looks almost as if she has a veil on or something. She is always kneeling down and I can't see what she is saying but I can see her lips quiver quite distinctly. She looks as if she is about in her late 60's or early 70's. I have no doubt in my mind that I will have this dream again.

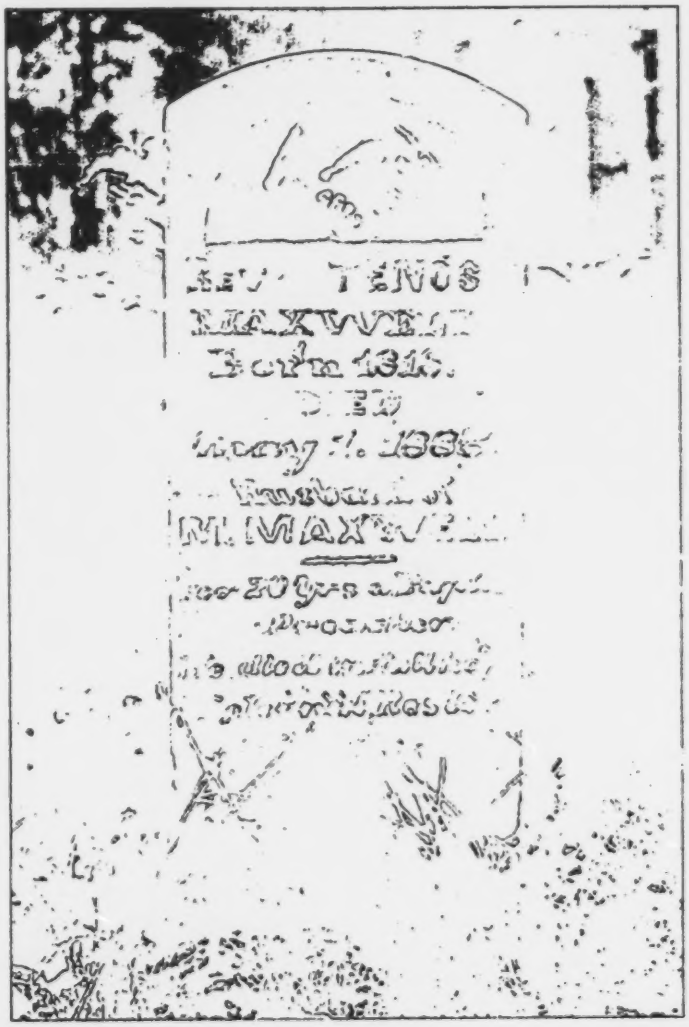
We also interviewed some older white people who knew something of the cemetery. One woman told us that when her father was a child, he had been friends with an "old black preacher-man" who was buried in the cemetery. She said that the man's name was "Primus" but she thought that his given name was Tenos Maxwell. She remembered that her father said that this man was "one of the best men that ever lived." It seems that when her father got older he developed a drinking problem. When he would come home drunk, he would often begin to cry and ask his family to "just carry me up on the hill and lay me down beside ol' Primus to die." This personal memory really gave "soul" to the project. As it turned out, her father's old friend wasn't Tenos Maxwell. Reverend Maxwell died three years before her father was born. Old documents that we discovered later, however, did show that there was a former slave who is probably buried in the Maxwell Cemetery who was called Primus.

Another local woman told us that she remembered sitting on her Confederate veteran grandfather's knee as a little girl and hearing him tell of the funerals they used to have at the Maxwell Cemetery. He remembered that when the funeral procession would approach, with the coffin in a horse-drawn wagon, all the field workers, black and white, would quit working and bow their heads reverently. He told his granddaughter that "the singing would just fill the hollows." This story raised a few goose bumps on all of us, since I had told my students about imagining what the singing would have been like at the cemetery.



Our historical research consisted of obtaining documents related to the cemetery and then deciphering them so that we could fit more pieces of this historical puzzle together. We found documents in local historical libraries and were also fortunate to have the help of Dr. Jim Megginson, a scholar of African-American history in the Carolinas. Dr. Megginson passed on to us several important documents that enriched our understanding of the Maxwell Cemetery and the people who lived near it. One document was an agreement between the former white master and several of his former slaves that, in essence, bound the blacks to indentured servitude. Tenos Maxwell's name was on this list. Another document was a list of Tenos Maxwell's personal property that was sold at probate auction shortly after his death in 1885. This made my students very suspicious that Rev. Maxwell's property had perhaps been stolen from his heirs through quasi-legal methods. After 1877, when federal troops left the South and congress lost interest in the rights of the newly freed slaves, laws that disenfranchised black citizens of their states were enacted all over the former Confederacy. In

1883, the Supreme Court interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment so narrowly in several civil rights cases that it effectively destroyed all the rights granted to blacks during Reconstruction. These state laws instituted a system of apartheid throughout the South that lasted until the 1960s. They were known as "Jim Crow" laws, after a popular cartoon character of the post-Reconstruction era. It was my students' knowledge of this unjust legislation that made them wonder if Tenos Maxwell and his estate had been treated fairly.



My students compiled all the results of our research in a booklet that we published under the title *If These Stones Could Talk: The Rediscovery of the Old Maxwell Cemetery* (1997). All historical documents, many oral traditions, and complete graphic documentation of the Maxwell Cemetery are included in this publication. It is a serious tool for further, more in-depth research of this important site. "God, Chief Pat," one of my students exclaimed upon being handed a copy of the book he helped to write, "I came here to work on my problems and now I'm an author."

As we neared the completion of our research, my students felt that we should have some sort of celebration that would honor the memories of the people whose graves we had studied. It was decided that on November 8, 1997, we would host a celebration of rededication, complete with dinner on the grounds. People from all walks of life were invited, including university professors, ethnographers, ethnomusicologists, archeologists, local people, and the entire congregation of New Promiseland Baptist Church. On a cool, brilliantly illuminated day, more than fifty people gathered on that peaceful hilltop to celebrate the restoration of lost memories. The pride of accomplishment exhibited by my students was evident in the excellent job they did as hosts. Their work was praised by those who attended, and they, in turn, offered the result of their work as a memorial that truly belonged to the entire community. A professional folklorist who attended the celebration stated that the rededication celebration "brought out the importance of the cross-racial responsibility for maintaining memories of communities. It is not enough to treat one another right *today;* we must be our brother's memory keeper as well." One student described the celebration in the following words:

To prepare for the celebration, the group went up to the graveyard and pulled weeds, raked leaves and removed anything that people could trip on. Then they threw straw all over the tractor road where the people would be sitting. They strategically placed chairs and hay bales where people could see the front.

At about 2:15 pm people started to arrive in the big parking lot for the rededication service. Blake and Allen helped people get situated in Chief Mark's truck, Chief Tom's jeep, or the tractor wagon. When everyone got up to the graveyard they signed a guest register. Some of the people who signed were Gresham Barrett, our state representative, and Jim Megginson, a professor at Hines

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Community College. Dr. Megginson gave us a lot of information on people up in the graveyard. The Reverend George Sloan also came. He would be bringing the day's message.

At about 2:45 or closer to 3 pm we started the service. Chief Pat started by introducing a few people such as Curtis Goodine, a deacon at the nearby New Promiseland Church. He led the song, "O' I Want to See Him." After that the group sang a special song, "Together in Heaven." When they were done singing, the Goodine family sang a song for everyone. Then it was time for the preaching. Chief Pat introduced Pastor Sloan, who preached on burial places in the Bible. He said there were burial places for Abraham, Jacob, Lazarus and others. He said that Tenos Maxwell, the freed slave who had donated the land for the graveyard, was an exceptional man because he wanted a burial place for his people, just like Abraham. After that some of the group led the entire crowd into the graveyard for the actual rededication. We got in a double circle around nine of the graves adorning the Toxaway Valley. Mrs. Simpson, an older neighbor lady was given a bouquet of flowers to put on Tenos Maxwell's grave....

Then everyone started to sing "Amazing Grace" and eight people, whoever wanted to, placed bouquets on the other eight graves in the circle. Mr. Willie Lyles, another old friend then prayed a closing prayer.

Chief Pat cautioned everyone to be careful as they walked around the graveyard that they don't trip and fall. He then invited everyone down to the chuckwagon for a good hot meal of stew and cornbread.

Sculpture by Dora Alexander, inspired by the Maxwell Cemetery local history project.

I often think about all the people that have long been gone that are buried up in the graveyard. As I sit here across the Toxaway Creek I look around and I can see old trees, but none of them are as old as the memories that the group coaxed from the rough hewn stones up on the hill.

This fellow was a bright, articulate young man. He was the only "Yankee" in the group,

having moved to South Carolina with his mother and sister to escape an abusive situation. His father was dying from chronic drug use. His mother was very loving, supportive, and stressed out. He loved to write and he loved the sound of his own voice.

The affective responses of my students to this project were overwhelmingly positive. In their imaginative journey into the past of a small Southern community they learned volumes about themselves, as the following student-composed poems illustrate:

Memories

I say that graveyards are places
For people of all ages and races
And from the people in the ground
A lot of memories are passed down
The seasons keep going round and round
And sometimes lost memories are found.

This student had a lot of memories, most of them bad. His mother and father both deserted him as a child. When we made contact with his mother she still didn't want him.

Burial Ground

When you walk through the gate
You don't feel any hate
When you walk down the path
You don't feel any wrath
When you look at the stones
You don't see any bones
When you look at the graves
You don't see any slaves
Because it's a free cemetery
And it's only momentary.

This poem was written by our resident "redneck." When he came into the group nobody liked him, not even the other rednecks. He taught his group patience, and the group taught him how to be a friend.

Another student penned the following reflection as he thought about our project:

> *I was thinking how memories had died and stuff and how we brought them back to life, and after we have all those people here at the celebration we could get them excited about it. We could make those memories more alive and how a hundred years from now, children would talk to their children about those white people that went up there and cleaned up our graveyard and stuff like that.*

Burial grounds are full of taboos. "Don't step on that grave!" "Whistling through the graveyard." This makes them incredibly interesting places. I don't mean new graveyards. They will never be places of mystery or taboo. How could plastic flowers and mystery live in the same location? Old cemeteries, on the other hand, are what some theologians have called "thin" places—places where the veil separating two worlds is translucent. They are therefore rich in potential for student writing. My students were not as sophisticated as those whose mothers drive Volvos, but their feelings for the sublime and sometimes tragic nature of our discoveries would have made Faulkners and Flannery O'Connors of them all, had they the present talent to compose their emotions. Cemeteries are literary places. What does it matter that this was often expressed only as *JMC Feb 1 1885?* These stark symbols made themselves into a full-blown story in the minds of my students. Why? Because they were hammered into a flat stone, stood on end among a hundred other such stony tablets. I think Moses had the right idea.

The photograph on page 8 shows a sculpture by Dora Alexander that was inspired by this project. It depicts one of my students "listening" to a gravestone to see if perhaps he might hear a message from the past. As he listens, a slave boy from the "other side of the stone" searchingly looks across the bridge of time at his peer from another age. This work of art captures the spirit of a local history project that became much more than school-as-we-know-it. It became a transformational adventure that joined teacher, student, and local community in proving that "when history speaks, the heart can listen."

Patrick Pritchard *is Assistant Professor of Education at Wesleyan College, the oldest women's college in the world. He has a B.A. in social sciences for secondary education and a B.S. in liberal arts from Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg, Virginia. He also has an M.Ed. in special education and a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction from Clemson University, where he was associated with the Clemson Writing Project. This piece evolved from the Clemson Writing Project's focus on writing about place.*

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In the summer of 1999, twenty teachers and site directors from National Writing Project sites all over the country gathered outside Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the first annual NWP Professional Writing Retreat. They wrote of summer institutes and National Board certification, of writing prompts and parent participation, and of pop culture as a curriculum tool.

Two of the participants, Donna Vincent and Kevin Lavey, considered issues raised when decisions about curriculum, standards, and testing are made far from the classroom. The subtext of both pieces: Teachers know things. Ask them.

What's Fair

The Story of Gifted Gail and Special Eddie

Donna Vincent

As our state of Kentucky becomes increasingly involved in education reform, I think more and more about fairness. Some feel that fair means equal. In a "fair" classroom, all children receive the same instruction, the same assistance, the same chance to pass (or fail). If students in special ed classes and gifted students receive the same portfolio scores as a part of our state assessment, for example, there's an uproar among some parents *and* teachers. How could it be? "Special Eddie" must be receiving too much help.

But that's not fair. Fair varies according to need. Recently I worked with a fourth grade class as they edited their short stories. Two students were having trouble with punctuation. One wrote sophisticated sentences and used dialogue with speaker tags (i.e., *said Sally*) separating the quotes, which meant she needed almost twice as many quotation marks and commas as most kids in her class. This complexity was causing her difficulty. The other student was also having punctuation problems. But his sentences were very simple. There was no dialogue. There were no periods, either.

For Gifted Gail, I counted the mistakes in each line and indicated how many there were by placing that number of C's (capitalization mistakes), U's (usage errors), P's (punctuation problems), and S's (misspelled words) in the margin. I did a two-minute mini-lesson on punctuating dialogue with her. She was then able to go back to the computer and, without any other help, find and correct every mistake she had originally made.

Special "Eddie" had different needs. He hadn't put one period on the whole page! There were other kinds of mistakes, too, but research and my experience have shown me that students are better served if we look for patterns of consistent mistakes to correct rather than trying to fix *every* error. Most children can't internalize that many different concepts at once. Eddie needed me to sit with him, move the cursor, and ask, "Now, what punctuation mark goes here?" He read aloud. He paused in the right places. He punctuated. In this case I was trying to give both students what they needed. I think that's fair.

But traditionally we haven't tried to diagnose or treat needs. We have had a scope and sequence to follow. Our lesson plans indicated page numbers and worksheets to do. Monday was for commas in a series. Tuesday was for periods of ellipsis. Everyone did them. It didn't matter if you already knew how to do the skill (like Gifted Gail) or if you still didn't get it (like Special Eddie). Gail got the A. Eddie got the F. F is for fair?

What if doctors felt that fair meant giving the same treatment to every patient? You make an appointment for your sore throat, but it's wart removal day and that's the treatment you get. What, you don't have any warts? No matter. It's fair.

I can remember going into classrooms to start a writing lesson and noticing a student who didn't make an effort to begin. I'd move over to his desk and try to give him some

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Student Slayer

The Imposed Curriculum

Kevin Lavey

In 1990, the Maryland State Department of Education decided on a strategy to create higher standards throughout the state public school system. The accountability system put in place was Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). Quite simply, MSPAP is an assessment given over several days in May to students in the third, fifth, and eighth grades. The aim of the tests is to measure higher-level thinking skills in an interdisciplinary way. I teach in the city of Baltimore, where the 1999 composite index for eighth grade is 15.3 percent (statewide it is 43.7 percent). At my school, Arnett J. Brown Jr. Middle School, the composite index is 10.1 percent.

Baltimore's response to the abysmal test scores has been to standardize the curriculum. All of us language arts teachers were given a three- or five-day training (depending on when you took it) on the McDougell Littell *Language of Literature*, then sent on our way. It was our tool, our curriculum, to help the kids do better on MSPAP.

Well, I teach a population of eighth-grade students who, as a class, scored between the third- and fourth-grade levels on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills given in October, from a text which is many grade levels higher than most of them read. The Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) decided which stories, plays, nonfiction pieces, and poems we are to teach. Supposedly, we are armed with the proper weapons to kill the ugly beast of low test scores. And those test scores need to come up quickly and dramatically or schools within BCPSS will be taken over by the state.

Why do I have a problem with a curriculum imposed on a population of students who historically have done miserably on the statewide test? Why do I find it offensive when principals, language arts department heads, and specialists speak with such authority about "reading stances," the "three outcomes of writing," and "*the* writing process"? Those people are charged with the Herculean task of raising test scores no matter the culture of the school. Many spend long hours at their schools or in their supervising areas training staff and doing endless battle with paperwork. But I view them, those people above the teacher level, as acting like supervisors over a group of mechanics. They see it as their responsibility to break our work into functions that they can check off on a task sheet.

I believe that the imposed curriculum that has been inflicted on language arts and other disciplines puts learners in the posture of receivers rather than creators. It denies them choice over their learning and, therefore, before the moment they enter the classroom, they are denied ownership.

On a fundamental level, if one considers choice the essence of democracy, the imposed curriculum is antidemocratic. Those in charge have decided that these learners are incapable of choice, or perhaps more insidiously, they have decided that if learners or even teachers are given choice they would make "the wrong" ones. After all, the majority of students in BCPSS qualify for federally funded lunches, are African American, are poor, often come from single-parent homes, and enter middle school with breathtaking skill deficiencies. (How can a student get to eighth grade and write a two-page paper without using a single punctuation mark?)

Students identify us teachers as part of the authority group, the choice makers, though

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we, of course, had no voice in the decision making. Since those in authority have decided what is important to learn, it follows that if students have not mastered how to be good receivers of the imposed curriculum, then they are to various degrees failures, punished in their nonmastery by low grades. It is interesting to note the close relationship between the imposed curriculum and punishment. One senses the issue becomes conformity rather than learning. The imposed curriculum demands that certain skills be taught along with certain stories or poems or nonfiction pieces and that other skills be taught with other readings.

On a simpler, more basic level, there is the issue of sequence. One would wish that the curriculum developers had created a sequence in which one piece flows smoothly and logically into another. Readings would link together and form a whole. The least the imposed curriculum could do would be to create a sense of orderly progression, no matter how disagreeable the content might be to students. Surely the imposed curriculum would establish a rationale for its existence by its sound linear trajectory. If students and teachers have no choice in the matter, surely the creators of the imposed curriculum recognize the value of one of the core Foxfire practices: New activities spiral gracefully out of the old, incorporating lessons learned from past experiences.

Instead, the first unit for eighth graders in language arts contains the following readings in this order, which we're asked to teach lassoed together under the almost defensive covering theme of Changing Perspectives: "The Treasure of Lemon Brown," a short story about a homeless man and an adolescent boy; from *Reflections on the Civil War,* a nonfiction piece about the life of soldiers during the Civil War; "The Clown," a memoir written about the middle-class author's eighth-grade math class; from *All Things Bright and Beautiful,* an excerpt from the author's experiences as a veterinarian in England; "Collecting Team," a sci-fi story; and "Simile: Willow and Ginko," a poem. Certainly lots of changing perspectives in that unit!

Such a fractured presentation of curriculum feeds into students' general belief in the irrelevance of schooling. The imposed curriculum defies or at least disrupts relationships between students and material because there's no logical basis for a relationship. What background can my African-American students call on that would give them insight into the humor and tender moments of James Herriot's difficulties as a young veterinarian? They do receive on some level the insidious message that because they can't relate to this big important-looking book in front of them that they just aren't smart enough to be good students. Because the imposed curriculum steals away the connections between who they are and what they read, their belief in themselves as learners within school gets chipped away. The imposed curriculum stands as the agent of power rather than a mere resource. They don't feel that they have authority over their learning. *That* becomes a lesson they learn. It is not up to them to figure out what they want to find out about. They know that if they show up it will be imposed on them.

I believe that the imposed curriculum is especially detrimental to students at inner-city schools. Middle- to upper-class students have access to a variety of resources that help them create a more complex context for their understanding of the world: educated people, computers, travel, literature, magazines, the Internet. For inner-city students, the outside-of-school resources are severely limited. School has a central role in making their worlds bigger, varied, adventurous, and brimming with possibilities.

Why not take students on both physical and intellectual adventures starting right where they live? Why not build a curriculum that takes into account their interests and values? Why not start with, say, the fashion industry, because God knows the kids inspect each other's clothing like high-strung *Cosmo* critics. We could have a lot of fun studying Timberland shoes, of which they are aficionados, and from there we could branch into studying sources of raw materials, demographics, supply and

demand, current social trends, and advertising. They could enlighten themselves on how big industries have a vested interest in programming them to desire overpriced shoes just to maintain a place of status among their peers. One can easily see how a curriculum can be built that honors the students rather than their test scores—a curriculum that teaches skills, yes, but in a context that connects to students' lives.

Instead, we impose a curriculum on the kids, repeating the mantra to ourselves that we're teaching them higher-level thinking skills along the way. The real higher-level thinking skill I see too many of them employing is figuring out how to negotiate their way through middle school, then high school, by doing a minimum of work while playing the school game to keep their teachers—the human toggle switches which deem them successes or failures—happy. The school system has become filled with decision makers for whom numbers are a kind of religion: their belief in numbers as a measurement of success has hardened to such a degree that if you begin talking about good teaching practices that don't genuflect to MSPAP, you're considered a not-with-it throwback to a groovy era before data-driven thinking.

If you take numbers thinking to its extreme, you could make a case that if my school, currently with a composite index of 10.1 percent, was able to get 40 percent of its students at a satisfactory level on the MSPAP tests next year, it would be considered wildly successful. We would have people calling us from all over the state wondering how we did it. It wouldn't matter if we didn't teach the other 60 percent anything, as long as we made such a huge gain with 40 percent of them. The number gods overshadow the students themselves.

I recognize that there are no simple answers to the problem of poor achievement. However, when the premise of finding solutions rests on a lack of trust in teachers and students, the outcome necessarily becomes rigid standardization. When are we going to find a methodology of creating curriculum built from the bottom up rather than the top down? It's not a new idea.

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What's Fair

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personal attention, and the classroom teacher would whisper, "Don't worry about him. He's Special Ed." Too much attention... Time away from capable students. It wasn't fair.

Why did we not try to meet individual needs before? Well, it certainly seemed easier to herd students through chapters of books and stacks of worksheets. A good teacher had five folders on the corner of her desk labeled *Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday*—manila folders with beautiful cursive letters. (I know. I had them.) A good teacher prepared ahead by filling these folders with multiple copies of worksheets to be done by all. All students needed the same skills. It was only fair.

We *still* have skills to teach, but when Gail and Eddie write, it becomes easier for a good teacher to see what skills they need and what skills they have. They've each created their own individualized "worksheet" to correct.

By using real language in the classroom, rather than confining ourselves to worksheets, we can now more readily identify strengths and needs. No guesswork. It's there, in black and white. We can address these needs in 15-minute mini-lessons that target, in small groups, the students who need to learn these particular skills. We can determine instruction the entire class needs, and we can pinpoint individual levels of attainment.

This approach to teaching is not only fairer, it's easier. In the past I've felt insecure and frustrated assessing the progress of individual students. Yes, I had grades in my grade book, but I still didn't know how much individual kids knew.

Is it fair that Gail and Eddie end up with the same portfolio score? I'm not sure that this is the question we should be asking. Instead, we should be asking these questions: *Is Eddie getting the individualized instruction he needs? Is Gail finally challenged?*

Good teachers identify patterns of need and target their lessons. When done correctly, Gail isn't stifled. Eddie doesn't fail. Is that fair? I think so.

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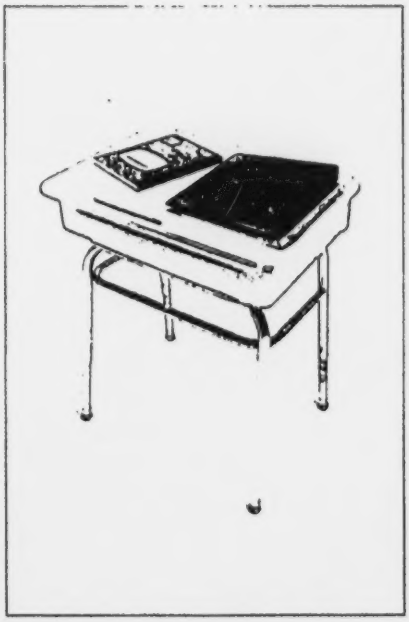
From a High-Tech to a Low-Tech Writing Classroom

You Can't Go Home Again

Charles Moran

I was a teacher resisting the old technology,
which, to me, was new. It required, therefore, a new pedagogy.
I brought to this environment my "old" pedagogy, which
I now needed to understand.

In the spring semester of 1996, for the first time in almost a decade, I taught our first-year writing course, College Writing, in a traditional classroom—that is to say, a classroom with chairs and tables, a blackboard and chalk, a classroom *without* 22 computers and a print station. I'd taught College Writing in traditional classrooms from 1982 through 1986; then in 1986 we set up our computer-equipped classrooms, and for the next eight years I taught this course in our new facility. Working closely together during this time, my colleagues Marcia Curtis, Paul LeBlanc, Nick Carbone, Margaret Daisley, Liz Klem, and I tried to understand how we might best teach writing in this computer-equipped environment. We developed and tested a range of techniques, often writing about our work (see Carbone, Daisley, Federenko, McComas, Moran, Ostermiller, & Vanden Akker, 1993; Curtis & Moran, 1992; Klem & Moran, 1991; LeBlanc & Moran, 1989). Then a break: I went on sabbatical, another colleague filled my place in the computer classrooms, and the writing program director and I agreed



that when I returned from sabbatical in the spring of 1996 I'd teach College Writing in a traditional classroom. I approached this semester with excitement and interest, thinking that this was a fine chance to do a comparative study of my perceptions of the difference between teaching first-year writing in two different environments.

I anticipated the joy of face-to-face communication in a small room with eager students. My teaching semester in the traditional classroom was a good one, by most standards, but I often found myself uncomfortable, irritable, even occasionally angry at my teaching situation, deprived of computers and forced to change the way I taught. My students seemed to me to be uncomfortable too, less engaged with one another, and less self-directed than they had been in the computer-equipped classrooms.

In the pages that follow, I will try to understand my discomfort at finding myself in a traditional classroom—what was to me a new and different teaching place. To move toward this understanding, I will excerpt from my teaching logs and from my students' evaluations of my teaching and their learning. My methods are those of the autoethnographer, as described by Linda Brodkey (1996, 28 and 172). The result represents my experience as a teacher in the

"contact zone" between the technology of the nineteenth-century classroom and the evolving technology of the twenty-first-century classroom.

I am not the usual autoethnographer, as defined by Brodkey (1996, 172), who, drawing from Mary Louise Pratt (1992), sees the autoethnographer as writing from the margins, a marginalized or colonized person who undertakes to represent the self "in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms" (Pratt, 7). I am light-years from the margins—a professor of English comfortable in tenure. When I began this study, I would have said that I was *entirely* comfortable. After writing this piece, however, I find myself able to empathize with—indeed make common cause with—writing teachers, usually poorly-paid teaching assistants or part-time lecturers who are asked/forced to adapt to computer-equipped classrooms. Of course, I was "going back" and not "forward," and I had agreed to the change, but the discomfort I felt in my "new" classroom helps me appreciate the discomfort I have seen in others as they were asked or forced to change, to move from a traditional classroom to a computer-equipped teaching environment. Between 1986 and 1996, as a teacher of College Writing, I had apparently made a gradual transition from traditional to computer classroom. My teaching goals and strategies had changed, at least in part in response to the environment of the computer-equipped classroom. Apparently, the transition was more radical than I had realized. The change was substantial and the effect expensive, certainly for this teacher and almost certainly for the students, whose learning is at least in part a function of the teacher's comfort with, and engagement in, his teaching.

Back to the Blackboard

This from my teaching log of January 30, 1996, my first day as a teacher of College Writing in a traditional classroom. This log entry was written as my students wrote. In this entry, I seem to be trying to like my new environment, but with only intermittent success.

> *It's day 1. . . and people are writing. It's just the same! Though I'm experiencing a bit of writer's cramp, and the day is moving along fast. . . .*
>
> *I'm sitting* close *to students as I write—I hear sniffles, pens & pencils on paper,* smell *students—there's no white-noise-hum-of-cooling fans and air-conditioners. . . . So this is a more physical relationship—and people are in radically different poses, too—one writing on a pad supported by a crossed leg, another with a white baseball cap, bill almost touching the paper, another sitting straight up, keeping the words at a distance.*
>
> *I'm not solving any lab-problems, either. No word-processor problems. . . . I've not had to identify (student) software experts here either—and there's been no pairing to learn the system.*
>
> *Most of all, there's less* room *here—less visual space, students crowded close to one another, less cubic footage. In the labs I could walk around freely, or stop at a station and type like mad. In the lab, too, I could enter the system's virtual space and travel there. Here there's virtual space too, but it's cerebral, inaccessible [to me]. I miss my walks through physical and virtual space. Cramped. No* room.

I continue on, ambivalent, pleased and irritated:

> *I've had to bring in lots of* paper, *which they'll take away with them, lose. I'll have to do more copies—I don't have the control I did have—papers can get lost—have the feeling that I'll be less well-organized here than I was there. Maybe more responding to writing? But I do feel closer to these people—despite the lousy chalkboard—this close writing together is really quite extraordinary.*

On day two I continue to be ambivalent about my new teaching environment. I note the wonderful silence ("There are sounds of people reading!"), and I note, and therefore must have felt discomfort at, the students' physical proximity: "Someone across the table from me—that's 12 inches!—asks Jack for a piece of paper." I enjoy the new variety in my visual field: "I notice that I'm reading handwriting. Randi's paper is in blue ink with green-ink notes on it. In my group there's black ink, blue ink, my long yellow pad, the green letter-writing assignment, the ivory syllabus, the deep-yellow no-show form . . . spiral notebooks, legal pads, 3-ring binders. Variety!" And I note that all this is "in my very small space!"

I begin, on this second day, to worry about the fact that my students either have to take their writing with them or leave it with me. This really shakes me.

> *I'm troubled, and so may the students be—I won't be able to see these pieces* at all *until they are due next Thursday. Online, I'd have their drafts in digital form*—now they take their writing away. *No copy service can help me here—we'd burn up the machine. And I can't make them bring in copies, or can I? Maybe it's just as well—why not*

have them be their own editors, and me the final reader/evaluator. Maybe the technology is pushing my pedagogy here—I won't be able to see all the writing.

I begin to resent, too, the amount of new work I seem to have to do. For instance, I've had to go all the way to my office to get to my computer to put together a writing exercise for the class, print multiple copies on blue paper, and cut the pages in half to distribute to the class. I wrote, "All this cutting and copying is time- and resource-consuming!"

I resent the grade book I have to construct for myself and my need to discover a new way of organizing the course. I wonder: should I purchase a three-ring binder? And an ominous note: I begin to feel that as a teacher I have to become more active, because I'm feeling that not much is happening.

I'm thinking that the class is pretty quiet—not sure how to bring them together in groups. Maybe—the problem may be that I've taken on too much direction here? I'm feeling very directive, disciplinarian, standards. "Read the damned assignment sheet!" What's going on?

In the third week, I note, "I'm starting to like this!" What I like, again in retrospect ominously, is this:

I ask them to write spelling words they have trouble with; they do so; they speak them, I collect them on the blackboard. We joke back and forth—I am a bad speller too. I'm drawing on all my experience here—as a writer. And I'm at the board, all (most) looking at me. I'm the entertainer! I could not have done any of these things in the computer lab. I'm the teacher. It feels like fun. I have no idea how good or useful this is to the students.

The Semester's Mixed Results

I wish that I could say that I learned and adapted as the semester progressed, but my teaching logs say otherwise. At the end of the semester, I am still bothered by the fact that students are taking their work away with them. I am still bothered by the amount of copying I have to do. And in my notes taken during the last class, I'm clearly troubled, not only by the strategies unavailable to me in this traditional classroom, but also by the possibility that I've not taught particularly well. In this last class of the semester, students are working away individually at their portfolio reviews, due before the end of class. I have brought their portfolios into class in the file crate that I've resorted to. And I've brought in extra portfolio review forms, two staplers, a staple puller, lined pads of paper: 40 pounds of stuff, at least.

As they work, I write this:

Today, again, the copy-problem: they take their portfolio reviews with them, so I won't see them before the final conference. Another glitch. I put on the board the goals I've had for them in this class: to have them become independent writers, use other writers for response, know and use writers' tools, get lots of practice. I tell them that I'll be available for references when they graduate. But my lips get dry—this is forced! They work away, but it does not feel good . . . a sad end to a bad semester. Or was it? I can't wait to see the evaluations—some of them may be OK. But I'm guessing that they're not—that the semester has been a bust.

Well, it wasn't a bust, but it was not what I had hoped for. My doubts about my effectiveness as a teacher were echoed by the students in their anonymous, end-of-semester teacher/course evaluations. These are administered and collected by a student, returned to the writing program office, and

not available to the instructor until well after the end of the semester. Students know this and are therefore quite candid in their responses.

I read through these evaluations at the end of the summer. There seemed a real difference between these teacher-course evaluations and those of the students I had taught in computer classrooms. Let me be clear: this class was not a disaster. On the op-scan program questionnaires, 10 out of 19 respondents said that this class had been either "the most valuable" or "the second most valuable" course they had taken at the university, not bad for a class that is required and becomes a "common experience," like dining-commons food. But when I taught in the computer classroom, students responded much more positively to the teacher/course evaluations. Typically, 75 to 80 percent of the students in these classes have ranked the course "most" or "second most valuable." From this year's students' essay responses, I received disturbing confirmation that our teaching and learning had not gone smoothly.

It seemed clear that the students felt, as I had, that we as a class had not "bonded"; that there was something wrong with the human communication in the room. Somehow I had moved into the center of the class, assuming more authority than I have recently been accustomed to having, and therefore giving the students less. One student wrote, "My instructor includes everyone and tries to encourage them to speak." She also wrote, "My instructor might open the class more and encourage discussion between students instead of doing all the talking and directing." Another said, "Lectures seem to be a little too boring." Lectures? Did I lecture? Well, yes, there was the blackboard and chalk. I must have done more of this than I realized: using, as I do in the computer classroom, the available technology—in this case, blackboard and chalk.

Reactions to class format were really mixed. One student wrote, "Charlie makes the whole class revolve on class activities." Another wrote, "Class time was kind of long." One student complained that I was not "fair" in my comments on the writing—a first, for me. And the same student wanted more comments, noting that "a great deal of my papers had no responses on them." This is my normal practice: to comment on mid-process drafts and not on final drafts. Somehow, in this traditional classroom, my practice was not entirely well received. In the students' responses there was, too, more than the usual discomfort at my practice of not grading individual essays.

If I had to put all of this together, and I guess I do, I'd say this: in the traditional classroom, my students and I felt that the focus of the class was on their relationship to me, the teacher, not on their relationship to one another—despite the fact that I had created reading and responding groups. In contrast, in the computer-equipped classrooms the students and I felt that the focus was on the task and on groups assigned to complete the task. In the new-to-me traditional classroom, this is what students see me as doing best: "Prof. Moran treats students with a lot of respect and talks to them like real people. His comments are always constructive and usually very helpful"; and "He is very well prepared for the class and can generate ideas for us as writers." That's fine, but I note their focus on my ideas, not theirs. "He listens when we speak and is very interested in our writing." And, perhaps most telling, some students wanted more one-to-one conference time: "I would like to see more conference time to review my writing. I feel peer evaluation helps, but I feel more comfortable with the professor reading my work and offering advice"; and "He runs the class very well in every way (lectures, conferences)." I'd swear on a stack of bibles that I did not lecture! But I must have, or seemed to.

Resisting the Old Technology

When I set out on this voyage, I intended to look for the differences between teaching in a traditional classroom and in a computer-equipped classroom. I found these differences, it should be clear, from my teaching journal excerpts. What I found and entirely did not expect, however, was the degree to which, as a teacher, I refused to adapt to my new environment. I began the semester complaining, and I never stopped. I did make a conscious effort to enjoy what was new to me in the traditional classroom: the variety, the closeness, the sounds and silences. But I was not able in one semester to adapt. Despite what I know about teaching, and despite my reflection upon what was happening, I continued to try to do in the traditional classroom what I'd done for the past eight years in the computer classrooms. And I couldn't. Once I found these strategies ineffective, I tried to return to strategies that had been successful in traditional classrooms in my 30 years of teaching B.C. (before computers). There was the blackboard, there was the chalk. So I used them! But because these strategies were old and perhaps misremembered, and because I didn't entirely believe in them, and because the kind of constructivist classroom I had come to think of as "good" was not supported by these strategies, they didn't feel right either. I was a teacher resisting the old technology, which, to me, was new. It required, therefore, a new pedagogy that I was unable to develop in one semester. I brought to this environment my "old" pedagogy, which I now needed to understand.

From a High-Tech to a Low-Tech Writing Classroom

In our years of teaching College Writing in computer-equipped classrooms, we had gradually developed a pedagogy that "worked" in this environment. We had begun with stand-alone computers, had moved to a networked computer environment, and now looked forward to fiber-optic Web access. As our environment evolved, our pedagogy did as well. With the advent of networking, our computer-equipped classrooms had become for me and many others "constructivist" classrooms, spaces in which students work, usually in groups, on tasks: responding to others' writing, editing and publishing bi- or tri-weekly class anthologies, working with community organizations on writing tasks defined by these organizations, and reviewing and organizing their own writing portfolios. In these classrooms the teacher is responsible for structuring the students' writing activities, but generally the teacher is not in the center of these activities. During class, the teacher chiefly circulates, helping student teams accomplish the tasks that have been assigned. By and large, in these classrooms students go about their work independently. They do not steadily look to the teacher for direction.

This constructivist pedagogy evolved in part as a response to the environment of the computer-equipped writing classrooms. One of the salient aspects of a computer classroom is that we have available to us two agendas for teaching and learning: writing and computers. If we let them, students can be the computer experts. They then meet over the computers and become, therefore, more able to meet over their writing. In our computer-equipped classrooms, many of us start the semester by having students teach one another aspects of computer use, which we know they are usually more adept at than we are (Carbone, 1993). In the area of computer expertise, students become teachers, and, this teacher at least, a student. We, students and teacher, meet over computers, and therefore potentially over writing, as something like equals. In this classroom, teacher and students are accustomed from day one to helping one another, to working together, in pairs or small groups—to find a lost file, to solve a printing problem, to solve a writing problem. The alternative to this distribution of authority is the assumption by the teacher of the dual roles of computer expert and writing expert. This simply doesn't work, as teachers new to the computer classroom find out each semester. If the teacher sets out to be the computer expert, then she spends her class time dealing with students' computer problems, which effectively take her out of what should be our principal work: orchestrating and improving our students' writing.

Through the miraculous compression made possible by the microchip, all class writing—theirs and mine—is potentially available to all.

What has seemed to us to be the inherently social nature of our computer classrooms has encouraged teachers in these classrooms to move towards a social-constructivist, task-based curriculum. I am not entirely sure why this is the case, but, as an autoethnographer, I am permitted to speculate. The classroom filled with computers looks to me not like a classroom but like a workplace—in the worst case, an insurance office. Students are at their desks, uniform. In my return to the traditional classroom, I noted variety of prose, of paper, of ink color. In the computer classroom there is still variety—colors of clothing, style of dress. But all students are typically facing their computer screens, seemingly paying attention. This looks like a workplace. The computers, too, are powerful work tools, asking to be used. With desktop publishing capability, why not publish our own anthologies? And if so, shouldn't we create anthology publishing teams, trying to put one wizard computer person in each group for the fancy stuff? The color-printed covers and innovative page layout? With Web access, why not generate group projects that involve research? Or ask a group to put together a guide to the Internet?

Teachers who have taught College Writing successfully in traditional classrooms—and I have to include my pre-1986 self in this group—have evolved strategies for helping the students relate to one another, as well as to the teacher, in this setting. In my return to the traditional classroom, I'd forgotten, or declined to use, these strategies. Instead, in my teaching logs I recorded a feeling of loss, even a low-level anger at the fact that I could not in this new environment use the strategies that we'd developed in the computer classrooms, e.g., establishing students as software experts and advisors, encouraging those who know something to share that knowledge with others. Should I teach College Writing again in a traditional classroom, I will spend much more time developing groups, creating community. In the computer classroom, community just seems to happen. Of course it does not—we make it happen—but after a decade in the computer classroom, my strategies for community-building in that environment have become second nature, tacit, transparent to me.

In addition to the inherently constructivist bias of our computer classrooms is a second, related characteristic: in the computer classroom we have infinite and cheap copying. Through the miraculous compression made possible by the microchip, all class writing—theirs and mine—is potentially available to all. Our writing—all of it—can simultaneously be on our class network, on my computers at home and in my office, and on the students' computers in their dormitory rooms. I'd become used to this: at any time I was able to read through the rough or mid-process drafts, or the short writings my students were working on, and was able to easily review all my comments on their writing. Students were able to read one another's writing and my writing back to them on our chat program and in our class folders where all our writing is stored. Outside of the computer classrooms, multiple copies are not always possible in the same way. In the traditional classroom, writing is private, not public. When a student turns in a piece of writing to me, she loses it. It's not hers any longer. When she takes her writing with her, it is lost to me. That's different, and it's OK. And it's not what I'm used to.

A corollary to this is that in the computer classroom, writing is relatively public. This became clear to me recently, when (yes, I have returned to the computer classroom!) a teacher new to the system, noting that students' writing and our comments on that writing were online and available to all, said, "Do you mean that they can read all these? How do they feel about that?" To her, writing was private. She'd just written something, and now we could all read what she had written! Given my years in the computer classroom, I *knew* that my writing—e.g., my comments on students' writing—was semi-public, and so I was writing to be read by the author and by anyone else who had our class password. Why should I have private correspondence with students, after all? That's different, and it's OK. And it's what I'm used to.

The Space We Enjoy

A third salient characteristic of the computer classroom is that in this environment we have more space per person than in our traditional classrooms. This is in part a function of our particular history. In 1986 we took over two huge rooms that had been language labs, rooms with lots of equipment in them, yet carried on the university's books as having a capacity of 20 students. The space we enjoy in these computer classrooms is a function, too, of the actual floor space that computers now require. A room that would hold 24 students in a traditional layout has space for at most fifteen computer stations. The space we enjoy is a function, too, of the talismanic effect computers have on administrators. The argument seems to go like this: "Computers don't sweat. They can't therefore regulate their body temperatures. They need good places to function in: air-conditioned space, with good lighting, antistatic carpets, and lots of room to move about, should the computers choose to move about. People, on the other hand. . . ." You know the rest.

This extra room permits teacher and students to get up, move from place to place, whiz around on our castered chairs—a form of in-class locomotion that has not yet sufficiently been studied, I think, by our discipline! Every semester there are a number of students in my classes who have marginal, or not so marginal, attention deficit disorder. These people need to get up and move. And so do I! The computer classrooms make this movement possible and nondisruptive. The space, too, permits us to easily form workgroups at sufficient distance from one another to make the groups seem autonomous. In the traditional classroom I missed this space, and I did not develop ways of making our new physical closeness a virtue rather than a liability.

This physical space is related to something that, drawing on Foucault's (1997) *Discipline and Punish*, I'll call "gaze" (171–77, 195). In a writing classroom, who is looking at whom/what and for what purposes? In computer classrooms, students are looking at their screens. To me, they seem to be working. I can look at them as the I-hope-gentle supervisor. To get students to look at me I have to act, sometimes almost violently, and I do this as little as I can, because I don't want to interrupt students' writing without good reason. I am accustomed, in computer classrooms, to watching, but not being watched.

In contrast, teachers new to our computer classrooms often find the fact that students are *not* looking at them to be profoundly disturbing. To become themselves the center of their students' attention, they often break their students away from the computers, pulling them into a circle as far from the infernal machines as they can get. There, they attempt to engage students in full-class, offline discussions.

In my return to the traditional classroom, I found the students' gaze disturbing. When I was being looked at by 22 sets of eyes, this seemed a call to act—apparently, all too often, a call to lecture at the blackboard. When students were looking out the window, they seemed off task; when they were looking at one another, they seemed to me to be off task; when they were looking at me, they made me feel off task. I had become used to the computer classroom, in which, like an insurance office, each worker

is at her keyboard, eyes fixed on the screen. In this setting, everyone is working, apparently; I, the teacher, am released. I am not at the center of the class, fully responsible for its progress. I am, rather, in and of the class, a roving editor, helper, checking in with the writers, or teams of writers, as they work. The responsibility for what is happening in the class is mine, of course, but I am discernible through my effect, not through the centrality of my voice and person. I am the "clockmaker" god of the Age of Reason, not speaking in the whirlwind but visible in the creation.

Computers Make a Difference

This has been the story of a teacher who resisted his new teaching environment and has since arranged his return to the old. In much of the writing we've done in our field, we've felt, explicitly or implicitly, that teachers who resisted emerging technologies were somehow deficient: Luddites, humanists, technopeasants. When we're gentle about this, we speak of what Palmquist, Kiefer, Hartvigsen, and Godlew (1998) called "teacher reluctance." When we're less gentle, we speak of resistance. In the popular imagination, and in the language of educational reform, this is presented as a teacher problem, to be solved by administrative force, teacher training, or time.

This self-study argues that the presence of computers in a writing classroom does make a difference, that technologies are not transparent, and that the change in moving from a traditional classroom to a computer classroom (or back!) is substantial and, in this case, for the teacher and his students, expensive. In 1992, Elizabeth Klem and I studied teachers working for the first time in computer classrooms in what we termed "A Strange LANd." We saw these teachers' pedagogies in unproductive conflict with their new environment—teaching against the classroom, not with it—and argued that "even if a writing program can provide the necessary training and support, it is unlikely that it can expect radical and rapid change in the way teachers teach." To this finding my self-study says, "Amen."

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What do you think?

We'd like to know how the presence of computers in ***your*** writing classroom changes the teaching and learning environment.

Address your letter to Quarterly Editors, National Writing Project, University of California, 615 University Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-1040, or send email to *editors@nationalwritingproject.org* with "Letter to the Editor" as your subject line. We'd love to hear from you.

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My Laptop Ambivalence

Some Speed Bumps on the High-Tech Road to Writing

Susan Cvengros Mortensen

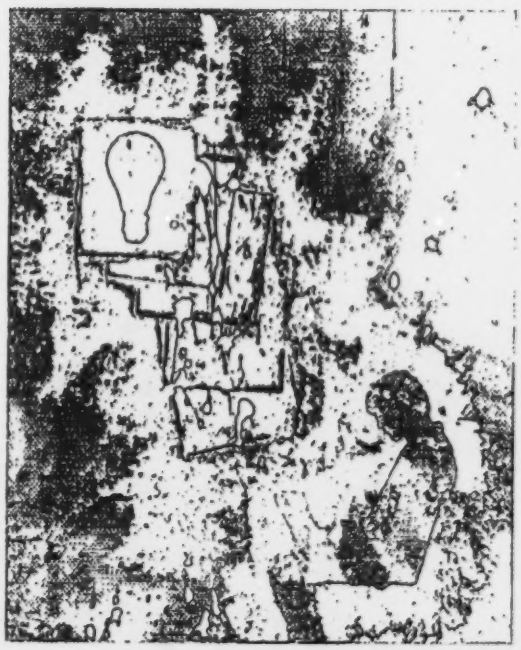
With all of the complexities that laptops have created, I have a difficult time assessing whether they have been a positive tool for students in the writing process. There have been encouraging results accompanied with a wild assortment of hang-ups.

"This will be a three-minute fast write, and the topic is on the board. Try to avoid stopping. Just write whatever comes to your mind."

No one responds. All I hear is "Tap tap tap, click, click."

Strolling among the desks, performing my usual teacher monitoring, I glance over shoulders to view ideas in development. Several students are plunging in, immersed in their thoughts, keyboarding at a pace professionals would admire. But not everyone is caught up in the heat of the moment. One student is stalled. He stares at a blank screen. Then, tentatively, he types in an idea. The computer reacts rapidly, scoring red and green lines under a statement it deems grammatically incorrect. Frustrated, the student sighs, hits the backspace key firmly, and removes the line from the screen.

"Don't worry about the AutoText, just get some ideas down for now," I tell him. But I'm too late. The boy has been slowed to a standstill by technological speed bumps. According to the computer, the student's writing is incorrect. If the boy had been writing with pen and pencil, he would not have been impeded by this insulting invalidation.



This incident is fairly typical of the exchanges between human and machine that I encounter in my seventh-grade English classroom. In the fall of 1999, a gift from a benefactor enabled all sixty-four of my students to be involved in a one-year experimental laptop pilot program. Each 12- and 13-year-old student was issued his or her own laptop to use at home and school. Since that time, I have made it my special interest to study how the presence of laptops has affected my students' writing process.

Having taught English with computer lab support for several years, I was excited about the prospect of students keeping journals and portfolios on the laptops. I was enthused about the possibilities of conveniently emailing my students and easily distributing materials via my teacher Web site. Above all, I was very happy to have all students on a word processing

system that was compatible with the school's, since transferring files had been one of my biggest headaches in previous years. I had, of course, anticipated some technological hang-ups. I was surprised, however, by countless other challenges. Having laptops in the English classroom has truly been a mixed bag. My ambivalence applies to laptop use at all steps of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing. I write this account in the hope that other educators will benefit from my experience.

Prewriting

I have made use of laptops during the prewriting process in several ways. Students have maintained computerized writing journals for generating ideas. In their journals, they write stream-of-consciousness paragraphs and create bulleted lists, outlines, and tables.

Here's how I evaluated this process in one journal entry:

> *Prewriting is only moderately successful. Some students go straight to it, but others waste time opening documents and playing with formatting. It seems like I should let computers be optional here, as they definitely slow some people down.*

The problem is that when some students use a laptop, writing takes a back seat. Some students are able to fly across the keyboard, but others type slowly and are stalled by the technical functions of the spellchecker and autoformat. In the old pencil and paper days, students were able to sketch pictures to illustrate notes and ideas. Now words are their only option. And my favorite prewriting technique, clustering, has become a formatting nuisance, even for the most computer savvy students.

Laptops also change the atmosphere of the prewriting stage. I used to open the windows and play soft music to get my writers "in the mood." Now, I find myself closing the shades to avoid the distracting sun glare on the laptop screens or urging students to quiet down after an overly emotional computer "crash" throws the class into a mild uproar. In the old days, a student might disrupt the class with typical seventh-grade horseplay. Now, at the beginning of every prewriting session, I cross my fingers hoping that the machines will run smoothly and that a low battery's "Beep! Beep! Beep!" will not drain our concentration.

My students, however, do not share my ambivalence with regard to prewriting on the laptops. Ninety-five percent of them consistently choose to use the laptops for prewriting when given the option. Many like cutting and pasting their ideas into a document instead of transferring everything by hand. They enjoy the fact that they don't have to erase an entire sheet of paper; deletions are now cleaner and tidier, with none of the unsightly erasures and scrawlings of the old days. Students are also able to keep all of their prewriting in the same place; they no longer have to shuffle through a disorganized batch of papers.

Drafting

"Well my goodness, that doesn't look at all like your autobiography draft. Isn't that Britney Spears's Web site?" The entrapped student rapidly clicks his mouse. Britney Spears is obliterated by a document entitled "My Swimming Career."

Laptops can be a terrific aid in the drafting process. It is wonderful to have documents on the computer so they can be manipulated easily. My experience, however, is the same as many of my colleagues who report that students can be challenged by the distractions of the Internet, CD-ROMs, and AOL Instant Messenger. One parent reported that he had received email messages at work from his child when the child was supposed to be in biology. During study hall, the librarians found students contacting their friends in other classes on AOL. Even when AOL is disabled and disciplinary guidelines are established, diligent computer users are tough to supervise in a classroom setting. It is always tricky for teachers to ensure that students stay focused. Adding laptops to the classroom causes teachers to be on their toes more than ever.

When students are able to maintain self-discipline, this stage of the writing process can become very efficient. Students have access to my feedback more quickly than with paper, and they can complete rewrites more easily. They can also pop off their drafts via email to me and their peers for revision comments. If they are collaborating on a group project, they can email their writing to partners and easily cut and paste new and revised contributions into their final product. Lastly, being able to neatly store the document onto an organized desktop has made for few "lost" assignments.

Revision

"Revise it? But it looks really good. I did a spell check!"

I commonly receive this comment when I ask whether a student has revised an assignment.

Of course, many students have always come to the revision process kicking and screaming, but some of my laptop students seem particularly resistant. Although I teach revision and regularly engage students in revision exercises, I find that many make minimal changes from a draft to a final

product. Prior to laptops, I was assured that students had at least one revision opportunity. They either had to recopy a paper by hand to make it a final draft, or they had to transfer their handwritten notes to the computer. Even when students were not actively trying to revise, these steps often improved content and rectified clarity issues. My laptop students look at their neat papers prepared in professional Times 12-point font and think that they have finished products.

But there is also an upside to this process: I can tell when a student hasn't made any changes. An electronic tracking feature enables me to compare the draft and the final product, tracing exactly what changes have been made. I can also insert specific comments on the so-called final draft and zip it back to the student. If the student has questions about my comments, he or she can email me and get a fairly speedy response. Furthermore, these methods enable students to actually *read* my comments. I believe I am not the only teacher in the world whose handwritten scribbles in the margins of papers have sometimes caused confusion.

Lastly, there is an advantage to using laptops for peer-response exercises. The ease of editing inspires students to make very specific comments on their classmates' papers. After a peer-response session, the editors will email the paper with comments back to the writer and to me. It is very helpful for me to open the document, see what changes a student suggests, and track them against the changes that have actually been made to the final product.

Editing

"Miss C," beckons a 12-year-old, "what does *passive voice* mean?"

"Oh, don't worry about it," I state confidently, "The computer isn't really correct on that one."

"Yeah," pipes in another student, "I'm always writing in the passive voice according to the computer. It doesn't matter."

"The computer is wrong?" replies the first questioner.

"Well, yes, pretty much, for now," I reply, tentatively.

For seventh graders, passive voice isn't way up there on my list of grievous grammatical faux pas.

I suppose that this query could have sparked a "teachable moment." However, if I stopped to explain every grammatical comment that the computer makes, I would spend little time teaching the intended subject matter of the class.

The main difficulty with editing on laptops is that students put too much trust in the computer and tend to assume it is right. After they complete spelling and grammar checks electronically, they often refrain from proofreading visually. As a consequence, I regularly find bizarre errors below the competency level of my students. For instance, grammar and spelling checkers cannot find misused homophones (their, they're, there). They also cannot correct formatting errors or spellings of unusual names and places. Lastly, the computer cannot account for missing pages—those that don't make it out of the printer when it's jammed or out of paper. I have received many papers with missing pages, because students expect their computers and printers to perform perfectly.

However, if students combine the computer's grammar and spelling checkers with visual proofreading, they can make rapid and significant progress. Many of my students have had strong issues with spelling, punctuation, and subject-verb agreement. In handwritten documents, their ideas do not receive full justice because they are masked by grammatical errors. The computer helps these students recognize their errors and enables them to become more independent, as they do not need adults to help them proofread their writing.

Publishing

Journal entry: April 27, 2000

I was absolutely peeved and annoyed with technology today. I mean, my gosh, it has lured us into dependence and then all of a sudden it drops you off of a cliff and there is nothing you can do!

For the past three weeks, I have been working on a project with the kids in my class. The project requires students to be able to email fluently, look at comments through Word, get stuff off of the Internet, and print. And wouldn't you know it? The server is down. No one seems to be able to fix it, although everyone is exerting his or her best efforts on it. With no network, it seems that there is no way for us to communicate with the outside world; a vital step for our success.

"Okay," I say to the kids, "we can still send email to each other." So, all week, the project is narrowed to an in-school scope. I communicate the change to students, and they respond with only mild frustration.

But then, the cords and the connections in the classroom become dysfunctional. I cannot email students their comments, and they cannot revise their work. Hours and hours I spent commenting on those papers, and how earnestly I want this project to be finished. Therefore, my frustration is at its peak. How can I brainstorm to solve this one? Disks—I search frantically for more disks. What happened to the 50-some disks that I had at

the beginning of the year? They are all gone! "Wait class, we'll have to pause and do another non-technology lesson while I set my subconscious to figuring out a solution by the time class ends in 20 minutes."

Ugh, what a day. This is a publishing nightmare. I'm continuing my love/hate relationship with this aggravating tool.

This anecdote reveals the worst of it. Right when students and teacher are ready for the long-earned finale of publishing, technical bumbling stands in the way. Although the frequency of this sort of scenario is decreasing, it continues to be an issue eight months into the laptop pilot program. Printing and emailing fumbles cause a myriad of problems during the publishing process. While there were occasional problems publishing in the old pencil and paper days, there were never as many glitches as there are currently in the age of laptops.

However, technological frustrations aside, I have been genuinely pleased with the way writing looks when it is finally presented. When work is published, it is with the professionalism of young executives. The students easily use newspaper, letter, and resume templates. They create Web pages, sidebars, presentations, and graphic designs. The publishing that occurs in my seventh-grade English classroom makes the poster projects and dioramas of yesteryear look embarrassingly amateurish.

Closing Thoughts

"Why Jane, how did you manage to get your paper done on time? You've been sick for the last week," I asked, surprised and pleased.

"Well, I looked up the homework on your Web site and was able to find a copy of the reading online. I wrote to a couple of other students on Instant Messenger to get the essay question and was able to draft the paper on time. I hope this is what you wanted. I didn't want to get behind."

Wow. We are in a new era. This 12-year-old student is not alone in her ability to use technology as a tool to solve problems. For the motivated student, laptops provide opportunities that did not exist previously in education.

But with all of the complexities that laptops have created in my classroom, I have a difficult time assessing whether they have in fact been a positive tool for students in the writing process. There have been encouraging results accompanied with a wild assortment of hang-ups. Yet, if I were asked whether I would deny my sixty-four students the opportunity to have laptops for another year, I would earnestly respond "no." With all of the havoc that computers create for the writing process, it is fundamental that students understand how to use them. Most colleges and jobs require strong computer skills. We are doing our students a disservice if we do not train them to utilize technology as an important learning tool.

I reflect back to my years of teaching without laptops. It used to be that I would take my students to a computer lab once or twice a week for technology training. Most times, there would be students who could not finish their assignments in the given time. They did not have the time to search the Internet and download information, create neatly formatted Web pages, or utilize the technology to its full potential. They also could not finish or make adjustments to their assignments at home. With my laptop students, there is no pressure to complete projects during school time, as they can take their computers home to add finishing touches.

Presently, the computer skills of most of my laptop students have surpassed many of the adult professionals in the school. Cutting, pasting, searching, and note taking are natural activities for them. Students find no mystique in using the computer, while many of my adult comrades are intimidated by technology.

Yet, I must ask, has the content of student writing improved with the use of laptops in the classroom? I answer with a very subjective "no." My seventh-grade students continue to write at the seventh-grade level. Occasionally, their use of a thesaurus has helped to elevate word choices, but in general, the conceptual level of ideas has not changed. At the same time, I can also assert that content has not been negatively affected. Students have made their way through the seventh-grade English curriculum and have learned a host of new technology skills to boot.

The benefits are certainly in balance with the costs when using laptops in the English classroom. I feel optimistic that many of the difficulties encountered during our transition to laptops this year are simply part of the learning curve. Certainly, we have entered a new age where students have "the world at their fingertips."

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Staging Learning

The Play's the Thing

Jean Hicks and Tim Johnson

With this method we've discovered that Post-it® notes literally give kids a voice. In the complex peer relations that sometimes silence adolescents in the classroom, this simple drafting tool makes legitimate their right to enter the dialogue.

Damon grabs a stapler, flips it open, and begins to talk into his car phone. He and Chris are in the front seat (two wooden chairs) and their ladies are in the back (two more chairs). Chris interrupts Damon's improvised phone conversation:

Chris: It's been a long day. Let's go clubbin' tonight.

Damon: What club should we go to?

Chris: What about the Ghetto Rose?

Crystal: No, we're not going to the Ghetto Rose. Let's go to Club X3.

Brandy: Yeah, we don't wanna go to the Rose because they always shootin'. We goin' to Club X.

Chris: Naw, man, they don't even serve liquor there.

Damon: Plus the chicken wings are terrible, too!

Crystal: Damon, you are always worried about the food.

Brandy: We ain't even gotta go to no club. Let's go out to eat or somethin', since can't nobody come up with which club to go to.

Chris: Well, I guess we can go to Club X. But first, let's drink this fifth of Hennessey.

In less time than it takes to watch an "NYPD Blue" rerun, four seniors on a cold and dreary Friday morning created four characters, each distinct, each with accompanying body postures and accents. In slice-of-life vernacular they crafted a drama, highlighting the tension that, to their minds, exists between males who desire to be boastful and live on the edge and females who assert quiet wisdom and urge caution.

These lines were scribbled on Post-it notes as part of a process that allows an entire class to draft and perform scenes for a thematic play during a 90-minute period. This particular scene was one of several that explored, from the unique perspective of the writers, facets of peer pressure. All of these scenes give students a chance to voice, in a non-threatening way, issues important to their lives.

In this article we discuss our work with high school and middle school students, but we believe this activity will work with students of all ages. In fact, this activity was inspired in part by "Puppet Plays," a timeless video featuring third-grade writing project teacher Margaret Grant of Missoula, Montana (ASCD/NCTE, 1984). We know colleagues who have used this activity successfully with students in upper elementary grades, and we ourselves have used it with teacher groups.

Initiating the Process

We begin by inviting groups of students to work together to create scenes for a thematic play using a method that we adapted from the work of Errol Bray in *Playbuilding: A Guide for Group Creation of Plays with Young People* (Heinemann, 1994). The key to Bray's technique is his insistence on a single theme. Each student-created scene is expected to connect to this theme.

Thus the structure of a theme play differs from the more familiar exposition: rising

action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Instead, the theme play depends on the cumulative effect created by looking at a single issue from a variety of angles. We have sometimes introduced our students to this concept by discussing with them the structure of movies and plays like *Twilight Zone* and *Plaza Suite*—works that involve a collection of vignettes under a larger umbrella theme. Each group's task, then, will be to develop a scene, illustrating one facet of the theme.

Choosing the Theme

In choosing a theme, different approaches seem to work for different age groups. Middle schoolers and even ninth-graders often have a difficult time distinguishing between a topic and a theme. When students come up with topics, such as sports, instead of themes—those larger abstract concepts that connect topics—we brainstorm with them, pushing them to larger ideas:

JEAN: So everybody has had some experiences with sports? Do you play them or watch them? [Several voices respond: "Play." "Watch" "Both."] So why do you play and watch? What makes sports interesting to you?

DONNIE: Somebody's gonna win.

JEAN: And somebody will lose?

DONNIE: Yeah.

JEAN: Why do you care? Why does anybody care?

SHONTAY: 'Cause we like them. 'Cause it's a surprise.

MICHAEL: 'Cause they've worked for it, they've earned it. You wanna see who's the best.

JEAN: So what's really behind the attraction of sports? Is it what they play or how they play?

DONNIE: Kinda both, but more how they play.

JEAN: Why?

MICHAEL: That's what you can't know. You can know a team's good, but they could be against somebody better or against somebody who is just getting better but you don't know it until they're pitted against each other. That's the fun.

JEAN: Would it be fun if everything were made equal and everybody played the same? Or if you always had a really strong team always against a really weak team?

DEANDRE: Naw, man, who'd care? Team's gotta be able to compete or there's no point.

JEAN: Oh, so it's competition that makes sports what it is.

DEANDRE: Yeah.

JEAN: So could that really be our theme, competition? Do you see how that's bigger than just "sports?" What else involves competition? Do people compete for grades? When I was in school, everyone was out for the top score. You wanted to do better than the next guy. Do you compete for grades?

ANNELLE: Grades? Not much. But sometimes I compete against me, against how I been doing.

JEAN: What else do people compete for?

VARIOUS STUDENTS: Jobs. Money. Prizes.

JEAN: What about things that you can't touch? What about attention? How do people compete for attention?

Our discussion continued as we examined each of the topics on the board: sports, teachers, school, bullies, brothers/sisters, summer vacation, music, and having fun. In trying to help students broaden their understanding of their concept of theme, our discussions of a new topic borrowed from things we'd noticed earlier. Our discussion of sports had helped us to see that a fight with one's sister connected to the larger theme of sibling rivalry.

Older students work through the theme selection process much more quickly, easily generating abstract terms important to them when asked to suggest themes. They'll suggest, for instance, alienation, racism, peer pressure, and love. The brainstorming that follows allows them to make these abstractions more concrete.

Racism:

- economic: discrimination and segregation on the job
- educational: attendance quotas
- voluntary: blacks have black friends, whites have white

Peer Pressure:

- sex, breaking the law, conformity vs. being yourself, drugs, alcohol, clothes, music

Specific topics such as "First Day of School," "First Dates," and "Family Reunions" can be fun to experiment with but tend to elicit stereotypical responses. Since the idea is to have groups develop scenes that could be presented consecutively, abstract themes provide the widest array of possibilities. One of the most successful thematic plays developed through this process focused on "The Generation Gap." We tried to avoid the predictable kinds of commentaries that involved adults downplaying teens' life crises. One scene provided a gap-narrowing counterpoint, portraying today's teens making the shocking discovery that some of their music was played 30 years ago. The most effective effort, however, involved one character berating another over loud music,

strange hair, short skirts, late nights, and loose morals. The audience was surprised to learn in the last line of the scene that they'd seen a teen lecturing her newly divorced mother.

Connecting to the Theme

After the theme has been established, students usually write for about ten minutes, summoning memories, ideas, and experiences related to the theme. We put the emphasis on the personal. Left to their own devices, inexperienced writers often resort to reproducing television and movie scenes they have seen. Borrowing from the media feels safer; as writers, they will not have to further develop characters or plots, or even defend the quality of either to their peers. When students frame their connections in personal contexts they eliminate this temptation and promote the kind of risk-taking that leads to growth in writing.

While we have sometimes had students share their writing in small groups, it speeds the process to ask instead for five or six students to share with the whole class. Involving everyone in the discussion helps the students focus on a narrow slice of the theme that might make a good scene. As each student shares, we invite the class to help create a title for the material being read and identify a specific aspect of the theme it embodies. In one middle school class that was considering the theme of sibling rivalry, potential scenes included:

- I Had It First (competing for family resources)
- Calling in the Troops (tattling to Mom or Dad or caregiver)
- More Than Sticks and Stones (name-calling, teasing, ridiculing)
- Battle Scars (wounds that recall famous brother-sister fights)
- Ganging Up (one sibling is always the underdog; leads to explosions)
- Fooled Ya (practical jokes, taking advantage of a sibling—especially younger ones)
- He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother (happy ending—I can beat him up, but you'd better not!).

A freshman class chose "love" as its theme. Our scene-naming focused on clichés and song lyrics that would be easy to recall as groups drafted Love Hurts, There's Plenty of Fish in the Sea, Center of Attention, May and December, and so on. Once we have sketched out possible topics for scenes we begin to ask other questions. What does each shared story say about the theme? Is it a positive or negative statement? Is it universal? How might we portray it using drama?

This activity reinforces the importance of personal experience in our writing, as students look at their own experiences and see them as sources for material. The discussion time is critical, of course; students writing by themselves often find it difficult to make connections, but in a community setting, each person's story evokes another. In the class considering the theme of "love," the following discussion took place.

QUENISHA: Mine's about this party that Angelique had before school started. Donte was supposed to be with me, but I caught him dancing with Shenata.

SHAUNA: Yeah, I heard Karen say the same thing about the boy. He is no good!

QUENISHA: Yeah, he's just like Darnelle.

SHAUNA: Girl, don't start talkin' about no Darnelle!

JEAN: So what's the theme you guys are thinking about doing your scene on?

SHAUNA: "Love Hurts." 'Cause we've all been done wrong.

Starting the Script

We encourage groups to form quickly, perhaps at tables or via the natural clustering that occurs as teens choose their territories in the classroom. Groups of three of four seem to work best, although older students have successfully involved as many as five or six actors. Sometimes groups form around one of the scenes we brainstormed earlier. The idea may emerge from freewriting or from memories of relevant incidents generated during our whole-group sharing. Other times a group compares notes and votes on a situation. Most groups choose one of the scenes named during our exploration of the theme, although some come up with a new angle that wasn't on our original list.

Next, each member develops a character. Since they have selected the scene together, students choices are necessarily limited to characters that might logically be found in the situation. They pick up on this with little or no direction, perhaps because characters arise from their own lives. In the passage at the beginning of this article, for example, the class had chosen the theme of peer pressure. Damon, Chris, Crystal, and Brandy knew they wanted to develop a scene exploring the issue of teen drinking. They quickly decided to become couples who were double-dating, in part because there were two guys and two girls in the group, but also because they knew from experience that the pressure to drink would be greater in a group setting. They could just as easily have elected to have a bouncer, bartender, or liquor store clerk instead.

Although we suggest that the groups develop the situation first and then the characters, some do the opposite. We don't object, since

part of the purpose of the exercise is to encourage students to try something new, decide what is or isn't working, and make the necessary adjustments to the material. Often a scene must be changed because students decide the characters don't fit, or a character is changed because the group has become more enamored of the scene they developed than they are of holding on to a particular character.

After group members have developed their characters or scenes, they put the Post-its to work. We give each student in the group about six colored Post-it notes. The lined index-card type is perfect. It's simplest if each character has a different color, so we buy the packs that have yellow, green, pink, orange, and blues (available at office supply stores). It has proven to be key for each student to physically hold his or her own Post-its.

JEAN: Okay, you've each got your character, right? Who's who?

ROB: I'm Jack, the gang leader.

JEROME: I'm Tony, his brother.

JEAN: Younger or older?

JEROME: Two, three years younger, I guess.

ANGEL: I'm Desiree, Jack's girlfriend.

JEAN: (Handing each a stack of Post-its) Here's orange for Jack's lines, green for Tony's and yellow for Desiree's. That way you can tell your lines apart at a glance and move them around or throw them away if you change your mind. So how will the scene start? [Silence.] Who'll speak first?

ANGEL: I could come up and say, "Hey, Jack, you were s'posed to pick me up after school today!" I could be kinda mad.

JEAN: Okay, put that down on your note. What will you say, Jack?

ROB: I don't take nothin' from her, so I blow her off.

JEAN: How?

ROB: I can say "You know I've got better things to do than play taxi for you."

JEAN: Write that down.

ROB: She's not finished yet.

JEAN: Doesn't matter. You can each write at the same time, as soon as you have a line you want to try. That way no one has to sit around. Just say the line out loud. Then somebody else in the scene can be thinking of a response. Plus if they've heard it, they can help you if you forget exactly how you planned to say your line. So Jack's got better things to do; what could come next?

ANGEL: [Putting her first line on the blank script] I could come back with something like, "Yeah, well you've got plenty of time to . . . hmm, what would he be doing?"

ROB: I'm hangin' out, makin' plans, figurin' how I'm gonna stay on top.

JEROME: Maybe some other gang is challenging us, movin' in on us.

ANGEL: No, I've got it. Rob's been seein' some other girl, at least that's what I hear. "You've got plenty of time to go over to Renee's. Destiny saw you there last night, so don't be lyin' to me." [She writes that on her yellow Post-it.]

Rob and Angel write back and forth, pressing their green and yellow rectangles on the master script. Suddenly Jerome interrupts. "Where's this leave me? I'm gonna join Lisa's group."

ANGEL: No, come on. You could try to keep us from fighting. How 'bout that?

JEROME: How? What would I say?

ANGEL: Maybe you've got a crush on me, and you get mad at Jack for treatin' me so bad.

ROB: And I beat you up for lookin'at my woman.

Angel and Rob start writing back and forth again. Once again Jerome is silent, but he scribbles a few words on one of his Post-its.

ANGEL: Hey, teacher! We need some more paper, some more yellow and orange.

JEROME: Hey, I've still got four Post-its left. How 'bout letting me talk for a change?

ANGEL: Okay, okay! I'm sorry, I just get goin' and forget. Why don't you tell Jack what you think of him right here? [She peels off some other Post-its and sets them aside to reposition after Jerome inserts his line.]

We've discovered that these notes literally give kids a voice. In the complex peer relations that sometimes silence adolescents in the classroom, this simple drafting tool makes legitimate their right to enter the dialogue. Post-its become their tickets into the conversation. As Jerome put it: "Hey, I've got four Post-its left. Let me say something next!"

Not all students will stand up for themselves, of course. Walking around the room, we can quickly count Post-its and intervene, if necessary. Whether a student's lack of involvement stems from personal choice or from the group's exclusion, our gentle pressure usually turns things around: "Hey, Jerome, you'd better get busy or Angel is going to have a monologue."

In addition to the Post-its, we've learned to provide each group with several large sheets of paper so that everyone can see the entire script as it develops. Students are tempted to divide the sheet in half and reserve one side for stage directions; or they may spend time thinking of a title for the scene so they can scrawl it across the top of their sheet. We tell them to focus on characters, setting, and dialogue. The rest can wait for the revision.

Learning Craft as We Draft

It should be clear that this process teaches some quite specific skills.

Using Post-its helps students make concrete the difference in punctuation styles between plays and other literary genres. But the dialogue writing format of playwriting can carry over to other forms, particularly the understanding that one separates speakers by paragraphs for the sake of clarity.

The activity also makes visual the concept of writing as a recursive activity. When students hit a snag, we suggest they go back and read their parts aloud. Sometimes a new line or direction will arise as they hear themselves in the scene. Revision is quick; lines can be peeled off and placed elsewhere or discarded completely. The process demonstrates that revision is not confined to the last step in writing.

The process also encourages a close look at language. Tim writes of overhearing the following conversation (Johnson, 2000):

"Man, that's stupid." The "stupid" sounded like it had extra vowels in it and spilled across the room.

"What?" another voice responded.

"You can't talk like that." The speaker was Kenneth. He was animated, punctuating his words with grand gestures. But his opponent wasn't easily intimidated.

"What?"

"You talk to your woman like that?"

"So?"

"So you sound like a freak."

"Hey!"

I stepped into the conversation. "What's up?" I asked.

Kenneth told me that he was afraid the dialogue would sound fake if the group used the lines written by Darrell.

"What's fake about the lines?" I asked.

He told me. "He sounds like some guy from the East end. Don't nobody sound like that where I come from."

"What are you guys going to do?" I asked, wanting them to develop a procedure for working together, to negotiate differences of interpretation, and wanting to leave the process in their control.

"I don't know," said Kenneth.

Young writers know that something doesn't "sound" right, but don't always have the language for expressing why. That gives us an opportunity to talk about word choice, dialect, and the way our speech patterns reveal our regions, backgrounds, and sometimes even our ages. Kids begin adopting the persona of their characters and, in the process, learn a lot about character development. They experience the way other characters' reactions help define the character, discover that the way they speak reveals almost as much as what they say, and learn that their dialogue must advance the scene as well as impart key information by making known the characters' actions. The drafting process in playwriting also teaches that we don't have any trouble keeping track of characters if they are truly delineated by the writer; we know who said what based on the words. Although the color-coded Post-its certainly help, they shouldn't be necessary in later drafts, when the voice of the character needs to come through.

In the scene-drafting process, students also learn about dramatic conventions. Staging considerations, for example, may mean that characters need to talk about having done

something rather than acting it out. Background or events that precede the action currently taking place on the stage are difficult to present to an audience. For example, in "The Ghetto Rose" scene at the beginning of this piece, we know that the characters have been in Club X3 before because Damon says that the chicken wings are terrible there. We don't need to show the characters at Club X3 eating those wings; we can just embed that experience and information through dialogue.

Walking through a scene can help inexperienced writers discover what Damon knew intuitively: the folly of attempting to act out everything one says. The middle school writers of the following exchange had not yet learned this lesson:

T. T.: Hey, Roxie, remember, we're gonna pick up Darrell and Kenny today. Go get your purse and let's head out. [Roxie walks off stage and air-steps her way to her room and back.]

Roxie: Oh, let's go get them at their house and pick them up. Come on, let's go get in the car. [They move left and pretend to sit down in the car, two chairs they have pushed together.] Where we going after we pick them up?

T. T.: We're going to the movies, remember, dodo brain. You have such bad memory loss.

Jean: Hey, guys, let's stop here and talk about what works and what doesn't when you're staging a scene. What does the audience absolutely have to know?

Jonathan: That they're gonna go to the movies?

Jean: So what kind of action does that require?

Deidre: Them talking.

Jean: I think so too. What action takes up time, doesn't really need to be shown?

T.T.: Roxie getting her purse?

Jean: What else?

Deidre: Them getting in the car?

Jean: So could the whole conversation happen in the car? If we have to know that she has her purse, how could you handle that?

Roxie: I could say something like, "Oh, no, where's my purse at? Oh, here it is, on the floor."

Jean: That's right, you could just talk about these things instead of trying to show them all.

Exchanges like this—beneficial as they are—help students discover that the play form has its limitations, largely because it is essentially dialogue. The more students experiment with drama, the more likely that they will hit a point where they're uncomfortable with this limitation. "How will they know what he looks like or where they are, unless I tell them?" a student will ask. We help them to understand that in drama, these duties fall to the set designer and the costume designer.

The centrality of dialogue can create another difficulty. Students who have been schooled in the dictum "show don't tell" are now being confused by our insistence on the opposite principle, "tell don't show." Working with this restriction, many come to value the power of description in other genres.

The First Run-Through

Each group needs to perform its scene for the class. They can present their work as reader's theater, each actor stepping up to read at the appropriate moment. Or they can plan to walk through the scene as time permits; scripts can be photocopied or students can simply work off the script, improvising rather than reading word for word. One group decided to divide up their script, since the Post-its are easily removed, so that each character could hold a page with only his or her own lines. Members quickly discovered they needed to insert the last few words of the previous line as a cue; after that, the process worked fairly well.

Groups are instructed to jump up when their scene seems to naturally follow the one they've just seen. This helps us talk later about juxtaposing scenes with opposite points of view and combining or omitting scenes that really have the same message.

We keep the props simple—a table and a few chairs are usually handy to serve as cars, sofas, store counters, and the like. Sometimes we've had a box of hats and scarves available to help students take on the persona of their designated characters.

Debriefing after the Scene

Talking about the facet of the theme that the scene portrays helps the group start to think about the play as a whole. This is also an opportune time to point out dramatic devices that the group might use to their advantage. For example, in "Ghetto Rose" would it have been appropriate for us to see the girls get out of the car and leave their boyfriends drinking in the front seat?

Tim: Is this a positive or negative message about drinking?

Damon: Positive, because the girls left.

Tim: True, they did. But what image is the audience left with?

Crystal: The guys tipping up their bottles, saying they'll just hang out together.

Tim: So they won. Your last image makes

them the winners. How could we make the young ladies seen as the winners?

DAMON: Stop the scene with them walking away?

TIM: Exactly. You need to stage it so we're looking at the girls at the end.

DAMON: Or what if we keep it like it is, but add the sounds of a car crash as the lights go out?

TIM: That would do it!

This kind of debriefing also offers an opportunity for assessment and allows the whole class to share in peer review by asking clarifying questions and commenting on the scene.

Revision Serendipity

Sometimes a student will be absent when a scene is written and return at the time the scene is presented. There's usually some confusion, but we've learned from this experience. We now schedule a session during which the writers watch their creation being performed by students who have never seen the script before. Not having the context that the writers have, actors who go into the reading "cold" will quickly discover some of the problems: "Hey, this isn't going anywhere. There's no conflict," eighth-grader Shanea exclaimed as she read her lines. The writers had to agree. They'd gotten so caught up in their characters' chatting with one another that they'd never really gotten to the point. When another group of writers watched as performers stumbled over some of their lines, they knew they needed to rephrase some wordy and confusing sentences and add a few stage directions.

Production Not the Goal

After the initial drafting and rehearsal, students are invited to shape their separate scenes into a short theme play, ordering them for effect and perhaps adding some type of opening and closing. The drama students want to tie their slices of teen culture together by staging them like the Clifford Odets play *Waiting for Lefty*, with an opening vignette introducing the concept, then a series of vignettes or scenarios, and finally a big scene at the end.

Some classes abandon the theme at this point, however. It has served its purpose, to allow students a collaborative writing experience not as easily carried out when writing in other forms, to teach conventions of the form, and to provide students with strategies that they can apply independently. A few students invariably get hooked on playwriting and pursue it during subsequent workshop time. Sometimes, a class will decide to switch to another theme now that the process has been taught and the limitations of the first theme have been discovered.

Whether or not the students' scenes move into the production phase, the activity has allowed them to learn far more than techniques of dialogue writing and skills of collaboration. Wagner (1998) reminds us that oral language is the seedbed for later growth in literacy (34). She notes that drama in particular supports students' acquisition of a standard dialect and helps them develop fluency in both reading and writing. Like Wagner, we've discovered that playwriting takes learners down many paths to greater literacy. It's not so much about the genre or about the product as it is about creating a culture that supports the thinking and learning of writers. In our classrooms, we stage learning, not productions, because we know that when we teach the writer, the writing will come.

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Kyle's Surprises

Anecdote as a Strategy to Strengthen Student Writing

Edward Darling

Donald Graves, speaking at a recent NCTE convention, asked his audience, "What gives you energy?" The question took me back to the days when Kyle and I talked about his case history, and the way he kept strengthening his drafts as we talked, enlivening his work with surprising revisions.

I first learned about case histories in 1995 reading Ken Macrorie's *Writing to Be Read.* In chapter eight, Macrorie suggests the following assignment:

> *Write a case history of some job, process, action—what happened through a period of time. An hour working with a computer, a day in the body shop, one swimming lesson you gave a five-year-old, one vacation day when you did "nothing" for eight hours. If possible, take notes as you go through the experience, or right after the act, and record details you can remember.*
>
> *Choose an action that is fun or misery for you, exciting or boring. Speak factually most of the time. . . . Make your readers respect you as an authority on this action by the way you reveal it in intimate workings, but remember not to lose them in meaningless technical terms.*
>
> *Pack in the detail but make it add up to reveal the essence of the job, or your feeling toward it (71–2).*

I decided to try a Macrorie case study with my high school students. I did not know what to expect, but I did know there was often a gap between a teacher's best laid plans and the less than stellar products that sometimes emerge from these creative teaching ideas. As I perhaps should have anticipated, most of my students wrote pieces that were mainly lists of generic activities and routines with no sense of the writer's involvement. However, one piece, "A Day at a Home Supply Store" by Kyle Ransom, seemed to have a skeleton structure on which we would be able to build. His draft gave a sense of what it was like being in the store. He wrote about the beginning of his work shift, getting ready for work, that way he went about arranging potting soil and light bulbs for display, his break, running the cash register, and getting ready to go home.

As my students always have a chance to revise their work, I decided the class should take a look at Kyle's workmanlike if skimpy piece to see what could be done with it. As we examined his writing we wanted to know if there was material he could add about arranging the light bulbs, and if there were any interactions between him and customers or fellow employees that could be considered part of his job. Kyle said he could add some material, but he didn't let on what it would be. Further, he did not revise his case history during the course, a September-to-January semester elective. The syllabus provided a few open weeks during which he could have worked on his case study; he did not choose to work further on it. And were it not for an unusual circumstance, he would never have developed it.

Kyle had joined the course three weeks late, at the end of September after the class was well under way. He wanted to change his schedule and assured me he would make up the work he had missed. By the end of the course, though, he hadn't made it up. I gave him an incomplete rather than a low grade because he had done so much good writing, especially about his family, his opinions, and a fellow employee at the home supply store. We arranged to meet for weekly conferences until he made up all the assignments.

In the first conference I asked why he hadn't revised his case history, and he said he preferred to write opinion pieces. Then I pushed a little bit. I said I thought his case history had potential and a revision could be part of his make-up work. We discussed what had been said in class after the reading of the first draft, and I asked him to tell me about how he arranged the light bulbs. He did. I was impressed by the variety of bulbs

his store sold and his knowledge of them. I encouraged him to add this material, even though in the first draft he had written: " It's hard for me to go into detail on how I organized them all [the light bulbs], but I can say it took me over two hours." I reminded him that he had said there were stories involving fellow employees and customers he could include.

The second draft, which he brought to the second conference, included more detail about the light bulbs as well as a story about a customer who had wanted help finding Christmas lights. This story was my first surprise in my work with Kyle, and it confirmed my feeling that he was carrying around more stories and details than he was owning up to. The story hinged on a misunderstanding: he had thought the customer wanted him to get an older, more knowledgeable employee to help her, when she had actually agreed that he should help her. This story took me deeper into his experience. There was drama in the misunderstanding and feeling in Kyle's uncertainty about what the customer wanted, in his need to remain polite, and in his failure to help her.

I asked Kyle if there were more stories like that, and he told me one. As he talked, I wrote notes to give him after the conference. He said,

> *Customers come in not knowing exactly what they need, and they expect you to pull a bulb out of a hat—they'll say, "I need a round bulb to fit a lamp this size," and they hold out their hands about two feet apart to show you.*
>
> *A woman came in and asked for a bulb for an oven, but she didn't know what size bulb she needed or what make her stove was. I said, "It shouldn't be too hard to figure out." So I picked one out. It was a standard size. But she thought it wasn't what she wanted.*
>
> *I didn't think she knew what she was talking about, but I remained polite. I told her I'd get another one, but she said she didn't want one and that she lived too far away and she left without getting one. One of the guys I work with said the one I'd picked out would work.*

This story was my second surprise. I asked him if he had still more stories. If so, he should incorporate them into a third draft.

He came to the third conference with a third draft in which he had added more light bulb detail and three more stories, including this one:

> *Two other employees were fixing the eight-foot-long fluorescent bulbs on the ceiling, the longest size we sell.*
>
> *"Hey, you want to do us a favor?" one of them called. "Bring these two burned-out bulbs to the back room for us."*
>
> *The doors that go to the back room are double doors . . . the type that swing both ways. The bulbs were too tall for me to walk through the doors with them standing vertically, so I turned them around so they were horizontal and tucked them under my arm. . . . . I approached the doors wondering how I was going to pull this off. When you push the doors open, they swing right back towards you. My plan was to kick the doors open hard so they would open all the way, then run through fast so the bulbs would make it all the way through without getting hit by the doors that would be swinging back . . . .*
>
> *I kicked the doors as hard as I could, they flew open, and I charged like I was using the light bulbs to joust. I was almost through when the two doors hit the wall, snapped back, and closed right behind me, shattering the last three feet of each bulb.*

This story and the others he added also surprised me. They were full of drama, irony, misunderstanding, emotion, and tension between adult customers and a teenage employee as seen through a teenager's eyes. Kyle had written three of the stories mainly as dialogues: he was using voices besides his own to tell his case history. The writing in these stories contrasted nicely with the narrative of his first draft, which had become a frame within which to tell the stories.

Kyle's complete text, reproduced on pages 34–35, is designed to show his process of adding material. The production of the piece, however, was more complex than that. He had to rewrite the part about the swinging doors to make it clear. He also had to deal with a problem related to the four stories, only one of which had occurred during the shift he wrote about. In a discussion of case histories in *Telling Writing*, a book for college-age students, Ken Macrorie suggests that writers might include

> *facts from several different days' experience and put them together so they appear to belong to only one day. That's not necessarily presenting the case falsely, if you're trying to show what the whole experience has meant to you (61).*

The option of using material over a longer time span than a day increases a writer's choices, and it was an option Kyle took advantage of. In his piece it seemed improbable that all four stories would have occurred within one four-hour shift. This problem led to the technique of telling a story within a story: occurrences on this shift reminded Kyle of occurrences from the

continued on page 36

Kyle's Surprises: Student Work

This student work reveals how anecdotes added in successive drafts turn a bare bones essay into one humming with life.

First draft . . . . Second draft — — Third draft ———

A Day at a Home Supply Store

KYLE RANSOM

I make my daily walk up the stairs to the employee bathroom, unlock my locker, and tie my green apron behind my back. My apron is furnished with all the "luxuries" an employee could desire: knife, tape measure, pen, pad of paper, price list, and a set of keys which unlock the back gates and the kerosene pump. I'm ready for another night shift. I punch my time card and head downstairs to the main floor.

Every night my manager gives me my assignments. The list of things to do always varies. Sometimes it's little things, like restocking merchandise or putting price stickers on different items. Other times, I'll be assigned bigger projects, like organizing parts of the warehouse, or setting up a display somewhere in the store. In addition to doing my assignments, I often have to "cover the floor." This means I have to watch my department for customers to help, and answer the calls that come in for my department. More often than not, the department I work in is called the seasonal department. We have all the outdoor items like gardening supplies, accessories for wood and coal stoves, kerosene heaters, grills, Christmas lights, anything that is seasonal.

Today I have been assigned to two main things. First I have to stock bags of potting soil. After I am done with that, I have to organize the light bulbs in the electrical department. And if things get busy, I will run one of the cash registers up front. There are always two going, but when it gets busy, I open a third.

I begin stocking the potting soil. There are three sizes of bags: eight, sixteen, and thirty-two quarts. I have a limited amount of shelf space, and I have to set them up so that all the shelf space is used, while keeping in mind neatness, organization, and easy customer access.

While I plan the display in my head, an old man approaches me and mumbles something in a raspy voice. It is hard for me to understand him, but I'm pretty sure he says, "Where do you keep the vice grips?" I point him to the hardware department. He nods, thanks me, and walks in that direction.

A few minutes later, he comes back. I am bent over, opening the boxes of potting soil. He taps me on the shoulder. I turn around, surprised to see him back.

"Boy," he says in the same raspy voice. "You are so out of touch. You stopped selling bicycles five years ago! Don't you pay attention?"

At first I am bewildered. Who said anything about bicycles? Then I realize what has happened. Vice grips. Bicycles. If you say them fast, they sound the same. I cannot help but laugh.

"I'm sorry sir. I thought you said 'vice grips.' My mistake."

"Yeah, right," he says as he walks away. "Nice try. Like they really sound the same."

Back to the potting soil. The space I have to work with is three shelves high, each shelf four feet long. I have three different sizes, so I give each size its own shelf. I put the thirty-two quart bags on the bottom shelf, because they are heavier and it will be easier for customers to get them. I stack all the bags from biggest to smallest, so the eight-quart bags are on the top shelf. Now, on to the light bulbs.

Thinking of light bulbs reminds me of a customer who came into the store a while ago. She stopped me and asked, "Excuse me, do you work here?"

"I sure do. What can I do for you?"

"Can you get me someone that can help me with the Christmas lights please?"

"Well ma'am, that would be me. I'd be glad to help you."

"Aren't you a little young? I was looking for someone a little older."

I was insulted by her comment, but I was still polite. "I'm the one in the seasonal department tonight, so I'm sure I'll be able to answer any questions you might have, and if I can't, then I'll get someone from electrical to help you."

The woman seemed to be sticking with her supposition that I was too young to help her. "Maybe that would be a good idea," she said.

"Okay," I said. I turned to get someone else to help her, and as I was walking away, I heard her behind me.

"God, how rude."

I stopped in the middle of the aisle and turned back to see her standing with a disgusted look on her face. Sensing a complaint, I walked back to where she was standing with her arms crossed.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?" I asked nicely.

"Yes there is! I'm trying to get some help, and you just walk away while I'm in mid-sentence. I consider that extremely rude and disrespectful!"

I struggle to maintain my temper. "Ma'am, I wasn't just walking away. You said you wanted someone else to help you, so I was simply going to get them. I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea. I . . ."

"I bet you're sorry! You're going to be sorry when I call your manager tomorrow and complain. I bet you'll be sorry then, won't you?"

I couldn't believe her. She was definitely going overboard. I tried to dissuade her from calling my manager. "Ma'am, do you think it's really necessary to call? I'll just go get someone older to help you if you'd like, and you can get your Christmas lights, OK?"

"Oh, so now you don't want to help me yourself! What, are you too

good to help me? Do you value your job young man? Judging by your actions, one wouldn't think so, being so rude to customers."

I was becoming exasperated. I went back and forth with this woman for another five minutes or so. She still was going to call my manager and demand I be dealt with. I told her to have a good day, and she left the store. It wasn't until some time later that I realized what had happened, and that when I thought she wanted me to get someone older, she had actually agreed that I should help her.

I continue on my way to the light bulbs, which are more difficult to display than the potting soil. There were only three kinds of potting soil, whereas there are close to twenty kinds of light bulbs. Everything from light floods to reflectors, soft whites to cool whites, night lights to spotlights, bulb fluorescents to halogens, appliance bulbs to energy-efficient bulbs. I don't know where to start. There are so many ways I can set them up, and I don't know which one is best.

I begin with the reflector bulbs and arrange them from biggest to smallest. The 150 watts are on the bottom, all the way to the forty watts on the top. I do the same with the standard lamp bulbs, and then again with the soft whites. Next come the colored bulbs. They are all the same size and wattage, so I arrange them by color: black, red, blue, green, yellow, and pink. After the colored ones come the long fluorescents. I stand them up vertically. Finally I set up the specialty bulbs—halogen bulbs, energy-efficient bulbs, night lights, and various types of decorative bulbs. I finish two hours later, satisfied with my job. As I look back again at the fluorescent bulbs, I remember something that happened to me my first day at work several months ago.

Two other employees were fixing the eight-foot-long fluorescent bulbs on the ceiling, the longest size we sell.

"Hey, you want to do us a favor," one of them called to me, "and bring these two burned-out bulbs to the back room for us?"

"Sure, no problem," I said, and grabbed the bulbs out of the corner where they were standing. With one in each hand, I headed towards the back of the store.

The doors that go to the back room are double doors, and they are the type that swings both ways. The bulbs were too tall for me to walk through the doors with them standing vertically, so I turned them around so they were horizontal, and tucked them under my arm, with about the last four feet of each one sticking out behind me. I approached the doors wondering how I was going to pull this off. When you push the doors open, they swing right back towards you. My plan was to kick the doors open hard so they would open all the way, then run through fast so the bulbs would make it all the way through without getting hit by the doors that would be swinging back. At the time, it seemed like a perfectly practical idea. I realize now it was a terribly stupid thing to do.

I kicked the doors as hard as I could, they flew open, and I charged like I was using the light bulbs to joust. I was almost through when the two doors hit the wall, snapped back, and closed right behind me, shattering the last three feet of each bulb. It made the most horrible noise, and I knew the whole store could hear it. I threw the remainders of the bulbs in the trash and swept up the rest off the floor. It was one of the most humiliating things that ever happened to me at work.

I decide to take my fifteen minute break. I buy a candy bar and a soda at the registers, go upstairs, sit down in the break room, and read the paper. After fifteen minutes, I throw my wrapper away, toss the bottle into the recycle box, and go to the bathroom. Then I open my locker, get a piece of gum, and walk back downstairs.

It is now 7:15. I have another forty-five minutes before I can go home. I notice the registers each have a line, so I get behind the third register and ring some people up. Running a register is always a good way to run into some very interesting people. When people ask me about things that happen at work, I remember something that happened once while I was working a register. One of the customers tried to return a lamp shade.

"Hi. I'd like to return this please," she said. "It's the wrong size for my lamp."

"Sure. If I could just see your receipt, ma'am."

"I don't have my receipt with me, but I really did buy it here."

"I'm sure you did, but without a receipt, I can't give you a refund."

The lady started to get defensive and aggravated, as was I.

"I can't believe you don't believe me! You think I'd really come in here and lie?"

"Ma'am, it's not that I don't believe you, it's just that I'm required to see a receipt before refunding any merchandise. The best I can do is a merchandise credit."

"Well, all right. I guess that's better than nothing. Let's do that."

Happy that we'd resolved the issue, I took the lamp shade and searched for the price sticker so I could get the computer number. I finally found the sticker, but in big red letters was the name of another store. I gave the lady a disappointed glance and showed her the sticker.

She blushed and mumbled sheepishly, "Oh, sorry, wrong store. I get you guys mixed up all the time." She grabbed the lamp shade and hurried out.

I ring up customers and it stays busy until about 7:45. When it dies down, I go out back and make sure the back gates are locked. A customer comes in and wants five gallons of kerosene. The girl on the register calls me to the front so I can get it. I go outside to the kerosene pump, fill the can, and bring it back to the register. It is now five minutes of eight. I relax for a bit, standing around with a couple of employees, talking. When it is 8:00, I run upstairs, punch my time card, take off my apron, put it in my locker, grab my jacket, and run downstairs and out the door. I am free until 4:00 tomorrow afternoon.

Kyle's Surprises

continued from page 33

past, and he told about them at opportune moments in the narrative. Kyle was relying on an ancient storytelling technique, applying it to a piece of nonfiction.

Kyle and I also discussed how his case history could be told either in the past or present tense. The immediacy of the present tense, he believed, was more likely to involve readers in his narrative.

I was so impressed with Kyle's third draft that I asked him if I could take it to my second-semester writing class so the students there could read it. We were pleased when they delighted in it as much as I had. A couple of weeks later I was surprised again when these students turned in their own case histories. I could see how Kyle's work had influenced them: several were rich with details, stories, and dialogues. Kyle's work had set a standard. It was published in our class magazine and has continued to influence writers ever since.

After "A Day at a Home Supply Store" became such a hit in my second-semester class, I wanted an edited version for the future, and I asked Kyle if he would meet with me for an editing conference. That summer we worked on the piece together for the last time, editing and cutting. If I were to confer with Kyle again, I would recommend more cuts, especially in the part where he shows how he arranged the light bulbs. That's an example of losing readers in something like the "meaningless technical terms" Macrorie warns against. I had recommended that Kyle include this material because it gave a more complete picture of his work, and its inclusion had seemed so hard-won that it never entered my mind that readers might find it unimportant. And details about his break and other tasks could be thinned. Following Macrorie's admonition to "tell the truth" I had wanted Kyle's experience to be as inclusive as possible, when I could have been helping him to think about what was significant and encouraging him to engage his readers by being selective without violating the truth.

I never asked Kyle why he didn't think of including his four stories when he wrote his first draft. Maybe it was because he had never read a case history that included stories. In contrast, the writers who have come after him have read his piece and others like it, and have seen the value of stories immediately.

As I look back over the history of Kyle's piece, I wonder if I should have kept suggesting he come back to it if, as he told me, he preferred to write about his opinions. While I console myself that my suggestions and recommendations were not requirements, I know that a student may interpret a teacher's advice as orders. I hope Kyle felt he was free to not work on his case history if he wanted to write something else. Whatever his reasons for writing his three drafts, he opened up new territory for me and my students that neither he nor I would have predicted.

In the preface of *Writing to Be Read,* Macrorie points out that a book on writing ought to include examples of the writing the book discusses and recommends. My experience with using Kyle's case history as a model has led me to conclude the same thing about teaching: my teaching ought to include examples of what my program and recommendations have produced. When I started publishing class magazines, I thought they would be a way for students to see their work in print, to read each other's pieces, and to preserve their writing. I wasn't aware that these magazines could become major texts in future writing classes—another surprise that grew out of using Kyle's piece as a model.

Donald Graves, speaking at a recent convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, asked his audience, "What gives you energy?" The question took me back to the days when Kyle and I talked about his case history, and the way he kept strengthening his drafts as we talked, enlivening his work with these surprising revisions. Surprise can be reward enough, but I see now that the surprises in this case led to discoveries about a writer's experience, and beyond that to discoveries about writing and teaching.

Because of the circumstances of Kyle's situation, I spent far more time with him than most teachers are able to spend with most students. But this investment of time resulted in a piece of work that, as a model, has helped many students write with authority about jobs, volunteer work, athletic contests, sports practices, classes in school, and workouts in gyms, to mention only the more popular topics. Students discover they have a wealth of material to select from and an informed, interested audience in their classmates who have had similar experiences. For several years now, I have depended on Kyle's surprises to show students the way.

Oh, there is one last surprise: Kyle is now a teacher. Or maybe that is not so surprising.

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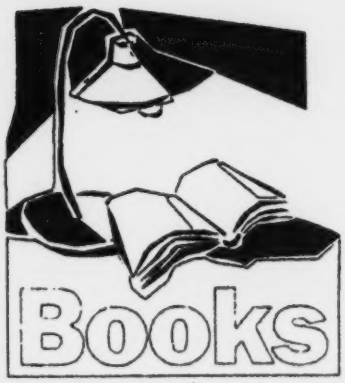


Reading for Understanding

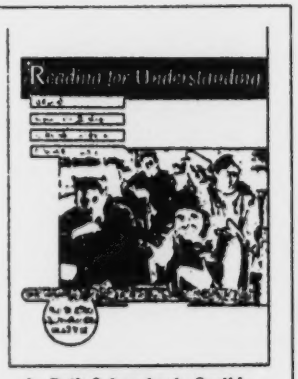
A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms

Reviewed by Bob Fecho

I have a natural tendency to distrust any book that bills itself as a "guide to improving reading." What can I expect from such a book? To be sold yet one more fad, another educational gadget, some one-dimensional, fly-by-night approach to raise test scores? Such books tend to depend on prefabricated models; they envision classrooms as monocultures and pedagogy as one size fits most and too bad for those it doesn't fit. Rather than building on the natural proclivities of students to make meaning for themselves and on the talents and insights of teachers for making rational decisions about their classrooms, too many reading improvement guides impose structures and dimensions that limit the many ways students can transact with text.

Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised by *Reading for Understanding*, a straightforward, yet nuanced, account of what the authors call a reading apprenticeship approach, one that centers adolescent reading instruction in three beliefs:

- that students bring both overt and tacit knowledge of the reading process to the classroom
- that reading is a process involving active engagement and monitoring
- that teachers have the insight to make informed decisions about their classrooms, as do students about their learning progress.



by Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko, and Lori Hurwitz
Jossey-Bass, 1999
$19.95, 224 pages

Such an approach flies in the face of high-stakes testing and national standards by insisting that learning decisions must be made at the school and classroom level. The focus here is on the teacher and the student. Accordingly, the book provides a clear but multibranched path teachers can follow to develop a strategic plan for helping adolescents improve their ability to read, not just their standardized test scores.

Reading for Understanding strikes the right balance between setting a theoretical basis for the approaches the book advocates and grounding them in classroom practice. The authors offer a conceptual framework for understanding reading apprenticeship and present an overview of instructional strategies that support reading development for adolescent learners. They then describe how they have put the reading apprenticeship program into practice, beginning with an account of Academic Literacy, the year-long reading course they conceptualized, designed, and taught to ninth graders at Thurgood Marshall Academic High School in San Francisco.

Their approach makes manifest in the classroom Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. They argue that teachers need to see that students can operate independently on some reading tasks and need the support of experienced others to facilitate the fuller grasping of more complicated reading challenges. To this end, they offer that students and teachers should enter into a reading apprenticeship relationship, one that calls reading process to the surface, that makes the invisible visible. This relationship allows for the social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions to transact through both internal and external metacognitive conversations.

The authors demonstrate that a primary way to help adolescents demystify reading is to *teach* it rather than to merely assign it. We

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Books

What Is Reading?

An Excerpt from *Reading for Understanding*

Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko,
and Lori Hurwitz

It is probably self-evident that the conceptions educators hold about the nature of reading shape their approaches to helping students improve their reading abilities. Some current approaches to supporting adolescent reading improvement address students' word-level reading problems as a precondition for working on other levels of reading improvement. Our reading apprenticeship approach is different because our understanding of the nature of reading is different. Here is a brief outline of what we have learned from existing research and our own observation.

Reading is not just a basic skill.

Many people think of reading as a skill that is taught once and for all in the first few years of school. In this view of reading the credit (or blame) for students' reading ability goes to primary grade teachers, and upper elementary and secondary school teachers at each grade level need teach only new vocabulary and concepts relevant to new content. Seen this way, reading is a simple process: readers decode (figure out how to pronounce) each word in a text and then automatically comprehend the meaning of the words, as they do with their everyday spoken language. This is not our understanding of reading.

Reading is a complex process.

Think for a moment about the last thing you read. A student essay? A school bulletin? A newspaper analysis of rising conflict in another part of the world? A report on water quality in your community? A novel? If you could recapture your mental processing, you would notice that you read with reference to a particular *world* of knowledge and experience related to the text. The text evoked voices, memories, knowledge, and experiences from other times and places—some long dormant, some more immediate. If you were reading complex text about complex ideas or an unfamiliar type of text, you were working to understand it, your reading most likely characterized by many false starts and much backtracking. You were probably trying to relate it to your existing knowledge and understanding. You might have stumbled over unfamiliar words and found yourself trying to interpret them from the context. And you might have found yourself having an internal conversation with the author, silently agreeing or disagreeing with what you read.

As experienced readers read, they begin to generate a mental representation, or *gist*, of the text, which serves as an evolving framework for understanding subsequent parts of the text. As they read further, they test this evolving meaning and monitor their understanding, paying attention to inconsistencies that arise as they interact with the text. If they notice they are losing the meaning as they read, they draw on a variety of strategies to readjust their understandings. They come to texts with purposes that guide their reading, taking a stance toward the text and responding to the ideas that take shape in the conversation between the text and the self (Ruddel & Unrau, 1994).

While reading a newspaper analysis of global hostilities, for example, you may silently argue with its presentation of "facts," question the assertions of the writer, and find yourself revisiting heated debates with friends over U.S. foreign policy. You may picture events televised during earlier wars. Lost in your recollections, you may find that even though your eyes have scanned several paragraphs, you have taken nothing in, so you reread these passages, this time focusing on analysis.

Reading is problem solving.

Reading is not a straightforward process of lifting the words off the page. It is a complex process of problem solving in which the reader works to make sense of a text not just from the words and sentences on the page but also from the ideas, memories, and knowledge evoked by those words and sentences. Although at first glance reading may seem to be passive, solitary, and simple, it is in truth active, populated by a rich mix of voices and views—those of the

author, of the reader, and of others the reader has heard, read about, and otherwise encountered throughout life.

Fluent reading is not the same as decoding.

Skillful reading does require readers to carry out certain tasks in a fairly automatic manner. Decoding skills—quick word recognition and ready knowledge of relevant vocabulary, for example—are essential to successful reading. However, they are by no means sufficient, especially when texts are complex or otherwise challenging.

Yet many discussions about struggling readers confuse decoding with fluency. Fluency derives from the reader's ability not just to decode or identify individual words but also to quickly process larger language units. In our inquiries into reading—our own and that of our students—we have seen that fluency, like other dimensions of reading, varies according to the text at hand. When readers are unfamiliar with the particular language structures and features of a text, their language-processing ability breaks down. This means, for example, that teachers cannot assume that students who fluently read narrative or literary texts will be equally fluent with expository texts or primary source documents.

Fluency begins to develop when students have frequent opportunities to read texts that are easy for them. Multiple rereadings of more difficult texts help broaden a reader's fluency (Pikulski, 1998). Perhaps most important for adolescent readers, fluency grows as they have opportunities, support, and encouragement to read a wide range of text types about a wide range of topics.

Reading is situationally bounded.

A person who understands one type of text is not necessarily proficient at reading all types. An experienced reader of dessert cookbooks can understand what is meant by "turn out on a wire rack to finish cooling" but may be completely unable to make sense of a legal brief. A political science undergraduate can understand that the phrase "on the other hand I will argue" leads into the author's main point and that the main point will be in contrast to the earlier discussion. But that same undergraduate may feel lost when trying to read the poetry recommended by a friend. A good reader of a motorcycle repair manual can make sense of directions that might stump an English literature professor, but may be unable to comprehend her son's chemistry text. And a chemistry teacher may feel completely insecure when trying to understand some of the original source history materials on a colleague's course reading list.

In other words, reading is influenced by situational factors, among them the experiences readers have had with particular kinds of texts and reading for particular purposes. And just as so-called good or proficient readers do not necessarily read all texts with equal ease or success, a so-called poor or struggling reader will not necessarily have a hard time with all texts. That said, researchers do know some things about those readers who are more consistently effective across a broad range of texts and text types.

Proficient readers share some key characteristics.

Different reading researchers emphasize different characteristics of good or proficient reader. However, despite contention in many other areas of reading research, when it comes to proficient readers, widespread agreement has emerged in the form of a set of key habits of proficient readers. This consensus could be summarized as follows (Baumann & Duffy, 1997):

Good readers are . . .

- Mentally engaged,
- Motivated to read and to learn,
- Socially active around reading tasks,
- Strategic in monitoring the interactive processes that assist comprehension:
  - Setting goals that shape their reading processes,
  - Monitoring their emerging understanding of a text, and
  - Coordinating a variety of comprehension strategies to control the reading process.

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can't assume, they remind us, that all readers know or don't know how to question text. Urging us to put our assumptions aside, they provide strategies for helping students and teachers to understand the reading process as it applies to each reader.

For example, students are asked to read a complicated piece and to take note not only of what they read but of how they read it. Such an activity allows them, perhaps for the first time, to understand their reading process, to consider that they have a variety of reading strategies, and to think about other strategies they might add to their repertoire. This new perspective makes it possible for them to take part in protocols in which they think aloud about their thought processes as they read to the teacher, one to one. Once students get past the artificiality of the exercise—few of us make our thought processes known as we undergo them—they begin to understand how such periodic inquiry into their process provides insight into the ways they have progressed or remained static as readers.

While allowing for both teacher choice and creativity, the authors present ways to help students become better questioners, problem solvers, summarizers, and predictors of text. The strategies they outline have worked well for them, but readers are invited to consider other means to the same ends. *Reading for Understanding* provides a frame with which teachers can build, not walls that limit growth, the unfortunate downfall of too many other reading guides.

Of particular note for writing project teacher-consultants: this book acknowledges the importance and complexity of process. Like writers, readers have many ways into a text and may be at different stages of independence within a range of genres. Therefore, the competent interpreter of poetry may struggle with a science-oriented essay on the ramifications of cloning. Also like writers, readers have a repertoire of choices upon which to call and need to have a metacognitive grasp of those options. It follows then that readers improve as readers when they incorporate various writing-based strategies like charting and questioning into their repertoire.

Furthermore, competent readers and writers who are challenging their skills take risks as they push themselves further to grasp more complicated texts. In this way, struggle and challenge are seen as part of the process rather than as pitfalls to be avoided at all cost. Finally, the authors argue that, just as writing has been advocated across the curriculum, so too must reading be both taught and used in all content areas in substantive ways. Only then will students improve as both readers and learners in those subjects.

Perhaps my greatest concern regarding *Reading for Understanding* is a dimension that is out of the authors' control. Despite their avowed intention to "encourage others to adapt and extend the ideas presented here" and to join in "an ongoing dialogue about successful practices for developing stronger readers in middle and high school" (xvi), my fear is that too many schools will be tempted to adopt rather than adapt these ideas to their situations. I support the writers in urging teachers to embrace the theory behind these strategies and then to select, adapt, and invent techniques that suit each classroom's individual needs.

In addition, I am not sure that the book develops the need or means for helping students to find a larger purpose for reading other than that the teacher has required it. Perhaps it is not enough that the authors advocate both teacher and student taking an inquiry stance. Rather, teachers may need some explanation of how one embeds these activities into a larger pedagogic frame—one that encourages students to find queries, feedback, and understandings to fuel continued reading. As useful as the strategies discussed are, they will be ineffective unless they are seen as part of a larger focus on inquiry and critique that provides opportunity for students to discover their own purposes for reading.

Those concerns aside, *Reading for Understanding* urges all teachers of adolescents to consider the ways reading is both used and taught in their classrooms and provides theories and strategies that will allow teachers to continue to rethink, revise, and refine their efforts. It does so with one foot planted firmly in the realm of substantive ideas and the other in the day-to-day experiences of teachers, students, and classrooms. It also does so without sugarcoating experience or denying problems. Instead, it raises questions about how implementation of some of these ideas is difficult, complex, and time consuming. The authors argue, however, that commitment to the reading apprenticeship will yield positive and measurable results.

Intent on seeing their work as part of a larger discussion, they close their book with this remark: "Making a vision a reality will require other productive teacher-researcher collaborations to mutually enrich theory and practice in adolescent reading" (177). I encourage all of us who teach to take up their invitation, their vision, and their challenge.

Bob Fecho ***is assistant professor of reading education at the University of Georgia. He is a teacher-consultant of the Philadelphia Writing Project at the University of Pennsylvania.***

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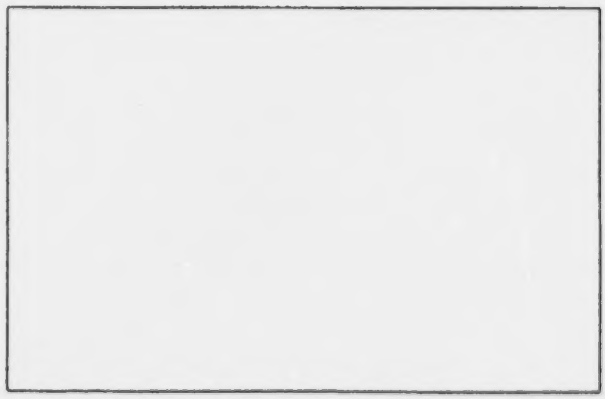

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Collaborative Dialogue

When Writing Becomes a Social Act

Mary T. Mackley and Carole Jonaitis

In many ways, this four-month correspondence between "students" and "teachers" invited a social act that gave both groups of students the power to become ethnographers of their own thinking.

Student voices, ages 15-18:

"This one sounds like a geek."

"Really? This one's cool. Look."

"This one sounds too smart; can I trade with you?"

"Oh my god . . . I've got somebody's mother!!!"

"Hey, I thought these were supposed to be college kids."

Student voices, ages 21-39:

"How personal should we get with them?"

"What do I do if we've got nothing in common?"

"How can I talk to them about things I like without them thinking I'm weird?"

"I think I'm feeling like their mother would when I read some of this stuff."

"How in the world am I supposed to respond to this? I'm the teacher, right?"

The beginnings of honest questioning. The initial effects of a semester-long letter exchange between college and high school students. The foundation of a collaborative teacher-research project that asked, "What can we learn through and about writing if we view it not as an academic exercise, but rather as a social act?"

During this four-month correspondence, our respective students—twenty-one of them in a teacher-preparation class entitled "Literature for the High School Student" and forty-two of them in a high school class entitled "Contemporary Writers"—exchanged more than 400 letters. We, ourselves, as teacher-researchers, assumed a dual role: we became observers, and we shared many of those observations with both sets of students in order to facilitate and encourage the metacognitive insights which they naturally and spontaneously shared with us.

As we listened in on their conversations, we heard echoes of James Britton: Find ways to make in-school learning more like out-of-school learning. We heard echoes of Jerome Bruner: Language is the medium of dialogue, and in dialogue knowledge of language per se develops. We heard echoes of Louise Rosenblatt: The development of an efferent, aesthetic reader requires a listener. We heard echoes of James Berlin: Language is never innocent; it is the terrain of ideological differences.

We heard one long, reverberating echo from Kenneth Burke (1974, 110-11):

> *Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, too long for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for awhile until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you. . . . However,*

the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still in progress.

Conversations Our Students Have

In teaching, we always come late to our classrooms—too late, that is, to have heard the beginnings of the kinds of conversations in which our students have been engaged for years, those "real" conversations about life and school and literature and teaching and learning and difference, the ones that take place in the hallways, on the telephone, at their lockers, in their study halls, at lunch. As teachers, we know instinctively, or perhaps through some primal memory, that those conversations are important, vital, intelligent, true. However, nowadays, circumstance often dictates that we come too late to hear them—perhaps because our ears are filled with the curriculum we are called upon to teach, or perhaps because those ears are covered with doubts as to the appropriateness, within the academic confines of our classrooms, of those kinds of conversations. Or, perhaps, because high school students, aware of both of these predilections, are savvy enough not to permit us to hear them.

The college students involved in this project were, on the other hand, new to teaching. Their ears were as yet uncovered, and they wanted to hear everything—well, almost everything. For they, in seeking to become effective teachers, quickly saw how the expressive writing recorded in those letters could, upon analysis, serve as a scaffold to transform the implicit knowledge of their high school correspondents into explicit meaning for them.

"Now what are we supposed to do with these, again?" asked our high school students after reading their first letters from the university.

Tell them what they want to know. Tell them what you know . . . about the things they want to know about. They're going to be teachers. What do you know that teachers need to know . . . about reading and writing and teaching and learning . . . about you? Be honest . . . tell them what you really think.

We can't.

Yes, you can.

And they did. And the college students listened . . . and heard.

Susan, the eager new college student of reader-response theory, listened to her high school student Brian's voice in response to *The Color Purple.*

Brian's letter to Susan was short, direct, and honest—perhaps too honest:

I think [the book] sucks. It's the most feminist piece of literature I have ever read. I think Alice Walker is a lesbian, man-hating bitch.

Then Brian continued:

Right now I'm 17, but I'll be 18 in January. I'm a senior and after graduation I'm going into the army.

Susan, in an attempt to compose an effective response, chose to share Brian's letter with her college classmates.

"Look at this," she gasped, "You can't believe it's okay for students to say stuff like this. It's not fair to the book or to Alice Walker."

As the class talked, they reflected upon the question of just what do we mean when we ask our students to give their opinions? To discuss? To say what they think? One classmate asked Susan, "What did you ask him in your letter? That's important."

Wrestling with Theory

Thus began a scaffold. The ensuing dialogue throughout the semester became an analysis of texts—the text of the literature, the text of the letters, and the text, both written and spoken, between and among our students and ourselves. Susan discovered that she had indeed asked for an honest response from Brian: "What do you think about *The Color Purple*? How does it make you feel? Do you like it or not and why?" However, Susan and others in the class still had trouble with students who thought like Brian and who were willing to believe, when asked about those perceptions, that it was okay to be honest in stating them. Another of Susan's peers, Emily, spoke passionately about what many of her classmates felt. "Susan, I can't believe you can allow him to say these things about the book and about women. I don't think I could handle my students saying these kinds of things—it's prejudice."

And so the college students began to wrestle with theory and with the implications and effects of its concrete, practical application. Through this searching process, they sought answers to questions asked daily by the classroom teacher. Questions such as: How can I encourage my students to read and to develop pleasure in reading?

Cora went in through the back door of Burke's "parlor," so to speak, as she sought her high school partner Kent's insight into the issue of wanting-to versus having-to read:

What kind of literature is your favorite (or who is your favorite author)?

What do you think about poetry? When I was in high school, poetry seemed really meaningless and confusing. I used to groan at the mere mention of the word.

In this bit of collaborative college/high school dialogue, Cora, perhaps unconsciously, plays the role of listener, a role which Rosenblatt assumes is necessary in the development of those efferent, aesthetic qualities we say we look for in our students as readers. And Kent, in his responding correspondence—sounding "smarter," by the way, than he ever did in his own classroom—testifies to the validity of Rosenblatt's assumption:

> *The last book I've read is* The Dead Zone *by Stephen King. I don't read enough to have a favorite author, but if I had to choose it would be him. I like poetry because it takes your imagination but when your tested on it I always get the wrong image. I think it dumb to have a certain point you have to pick out of it.*

Stock photo by Elizabeth Crews

Further along in his letter, Kent talks about *The Color Purple,* and asserts his hope for Celie:

> *I'm up to page 60 in the book and hope Celie learns to stand up for herself. One other thing I thought was funny is when Sophia beats up Harpo. It reminds me of me and my sister.*

Kent's honest, real, and non-"academic" response to his reading causes one to wonder: What kinds of readers of literature do we want our students to be? Are our students naively yet intuitively aware of much of the current research in reading and responding to a text?

Cora provides a scaffold for Kent in her direct, honest response to the text of his letter. She invites him to join her as a coreader of Walker and as a colistener to each other's aesthetic-efferent probings:

> *How did you like* The Color Purple? *I really enjoyed it. It's so different from the other literature I've been reading lately. Some parts of the book were quite shocking. Did you find anything strange or shocking? I had a hard time at first with the book. The language is hard, isn't it? I kept translating everything Celie wrote into my own way of speaking or writing. I guess I had to make sense of the book through my own English. Many social problems come up in the book. Which one bothered you the most? Why? A lot of what occurs in the book does not apply to my own life. Growing up in the suburbs in a middle class family does not really compare to Celie's life does it? However, I learned a lot from this book about how life should be lived. Did you learn anything? In your last letter, you mentioned how funny it was when Harpo was beat up by Sophia. I thought that was funny because he lied to Celie about how he received the bruises. Celie saw right through him; she knew what really happened. I really enjoyed the ending of the book, but I won't say another word in case you haven't finished it.*

In his subsequent letter, Kent piggybacks off Cora's comments about her reading. As he does so, something important seems to happen. He (happily) commits an age-old, always to be guarded against, student faux pas—never admit that you haven't been keeping up with your homework—because his mind seems to be occupied with other matters, namely the social issues raised in the novel and a previous class discussion that seems to have provided him with an entry point to his own feelings.

> *I can't believe you read that book so fast. I guess it's just because I read so slow. I'm [still and have been for the past two weeks] on page 60 and so far I find the book kind of bizzare. It's weird how the husband can just screw around and it seems like the wife doesn't even care. The thing that bothered me the most was the incest between Celie and her father. Our class had a discussion on which of the social problems bothered us the most and most chose the same one I did. I can't really compare anything in my life to this book because I grew up in an*

environment much like the one you did. I guess I can be thankful that I didn't have to deal with any of these problems and I hope I never will. I'm glad you didn't give away the ending because I probably won't finish the book for another week.

Both Kent and Cora, through their honest, white-middle-class language, have become engaged in one of Burke's "parlor conversations." Alice Walker is also present. But even she is unable to "pause and tell [them] exactly what it is about." However, even though no one was "qualified to retrace for [them] all the steps that had gone before," both of our teachers/learners took the risk, "caught the tenor of the argument, then put in [their] oars."

As Cora and the other more experienced college students began to see what they could learn from analyzing discourse with their high school correspondents, they became more reflective student teachers. And, likewise, as the high school students began to see, and to believe in, their roles as "teachers," they became better learners, better students, and better students of their own learning.

And all of us involved began to better understand Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz's observations about power as discussed in Marilyn Cooper and Michael Holzman's *Writing as Social Action* (1989, 210):

> *[T]he source of power within a discourse [community] can be seen to arise not from the meaning, form, and objects of one's discourse, but rather from one's position in the structure of [the] society.*

During this four-month letter exchange, all of us found ourselves in the middle of a wrestling match going on between our "teacher" role and our "learner" role—a state of mind, we eventually concluded, which is perhaps indigenous to a transactional model of teaching.

After trying out possible responses to Brian's letter with her college peers, Susan wrote him the following letter. Which role did she choose . . . which kind of "power" is she attempting to exert here . . . which of her many honest "voices" is she using?

> *Brian,*
> *I suppose you expect me to start lecturing you on the finer points of literature. I won't. I'm sure you already understand them—everyone does—they just don't all know the right words. I am, however, going to be honest with you again. There is no way, just from reading the book, that you can define its author. The whole point of fiction is that the author is making it up. It's not a textbook, not history full of facts and dates.* The Color Purple *is how Walker imagines that a woman in Celie's situation would behave and react.*
>
> *I have enclosed a poem that demonstrates what I have just said. Very rarely is the author the "speaker." This poem is about a man whose wife is dead—he imagines her spirit is in the vacuum cleaner. That's no big deal—it's just a poem. The point is that Nemeur's wife (he is married) is not dead. There was a big scandal when it was first published because of that. The literary critics felt that he could not adequately deal with the death of his wife in poetry because it hadn't really happened. Nemeur's poem, however, stands on its own—obviously he cannot be the speaker. But the poem is still powerful, moving. You see, the writer/poet doesn't have to have experienced what they write about. They don't even have to agree with it. I myself write horror stories that give my mother grey hair—and yet I got freaked out the first time I saw* Gremlins. *So who am I (or you) to say anything about Alice Walker, just on the basis of one book?*
>
> *Why did you think of the book as 'feminist?" Nobody really got "liberated." There are still a lot of unanswered questions at the end. Celie has to get to know two grown children that are hers, but she isn't their "mother." So really, she is all alone at the close of the book—there is really a lot of sadness. So how is it feminist? Did Celie really "win" anything? Did the men in the book "lose" anything? Did they lose their manhood—or finally gain it?*

Can you guess Brian's response to this letter?

Assessing the Dialogue

In the subsequent weeks and months, Susan and her peers wrote other letters, and shared, reflected upon, and analyzed their high school students' responses. Since the basis of that analysis lay within the context of the theorists they were reading at the time, the extended dialogue grew to include the voices of Rosenblatt, Probst, Britton, Corcoran, Evans, Knoblauch, and Brannon. Together, they searched the research for practical answers to difficult theoretical questions:

1) How can teachers effectively listen to a student's honest, expressive response without reacting personally to a "skewed" interpretation? Is this possible or even educationally desirable?

2) How can teachers lead students from an expressive, gut reaction to a text toward a

textually based dialogue with the author of that text?

And as teachers (of a teacher-preparation course and of a high school English course), we searched for our own additional answers to these questions:

1) How do our students hear what we say when we ask for textual support for their opinions? Do they hear us saying "You didn't get it right again," when what we really mean is "I want to hear more about what makes you think like this"?

2) How does our role as the power figure in the class affect the transmission of language? Whether we label our philosophical stance as new critic, reader-response, student-centered, feminist, or something else, do we really want to hear the "why" of their beliefs? Do we really need to overlook the language of a Brian's voice as we roll our eyes and tap our toes while we wait for the "right" interpretation expressed in the "appropriate" language of the classroom?

3) What do our students, both high school and college, understand already, in a metaphysical sense, about this subliminal language of power which permeates and controls classroom dialogue?

"Language is never innocent," James Berlin said in a recent talk. "It is the terrain of ideological differences." When we question our students, when we evaluate their responses, when we respond to their questions, we are indeed treading, as both of us discovered, through a minefield of ideological differences. Every now and then, during the course of the correspondence, somebody would inevitably step on a piece of conversation that blew up, so to speak. And the question then became one of how to handle those differences in student-teacher ideology, those divergent interpretations of language, those dissonant philosophical stances, if you will. Those differences affected the roles they were trying to play—with us, with each other, and with their high school/college correspondents.

When it came right down to it, the greatest difficulty lay in handling the "oars" with which each side—student and teacher—navigated. The one single force that seemed to underlie our advice to high school and college students seems so simple: Be honest. Both groups of students struggled with issues of "I can't say that" or "I want to tell them this but . . ." or "I don't want them to think I'm weird" or "I don't think they'll care about this so I won't tell them" or "This is what I want to say but you can't say that to kids" or "You can't say that to teachers."

Creating Honest Dialogue

One strategy for creating honest conversation is reflected in what one of the college students was willing to do with her high-school collaborator very early on in the correspondence: Give someone permission to drop his/her "oar" into the conversation.

In this letter, Marian gives Tim permission to assume the "teacher" role:

> *Dear Tim,*
> *In order to gather your input in a different and fun way, I am making you the teacher and myself the student . . . do the best you can and remember, you're the teacher so have fun making your own rules.*

She continues by asking her partner what their class syllabus might look like:

> *Let's suppose I just received your syllabus with a list of assignments. Could you tell me what some of those assignments might be? Would I be expected to do a lot of reading and writing? If so, why? Are reading and writing important to you? What would these activities do for me, the student? What types of literature would you ask that I read? Does the literature deal with romance, sports, tragedy, humor, or beauty? Any other topics? Why do you think these topics are important for me to experience? Am I to read poetry, short stories, novels, essays, song lyrics, biographies, or cereal boxes? Are there advantages to reading each type? Oh, and by the way, teacher, what the heck is "literature" anyway?*

As other readers of Marian's letter, we, along with Marian's classmates, found ourselves curious about what in the language of her text created a social context that allowed Tim to respond this way:

> *Dear Marian,*
> *I find this Pen Pal thing between us neat. It's something new. Let me tell you a little about myself. I love sports. I play hockey and plan on playing in college. I also play football and baseball. Sports is a big part of my life. Music is something I can't live without. . . . I also love partying and being with my girlfriend.*
>
> *Let's talk english now. I'm the teacher huh? Sounds [like] fun. My syllabus for you would have a variety of different assignments. First I would have you write me a few papers on simple topics like, who am I, etc. Just to get to know ya as a writer. You would have to write on things you find comfortable writing on. I would also have you write a fiction paper on anything, a short story. Just to see what imagination you have. To tell you the truth writing really isn't that important to me. Reading on the other hand is. I feel reading*

br[oadens] your mind. You can learn alot if you read. I would have you read nonfiction like sports stars, etc. Then for fiction I would have you read the classics all the way up to some of the authors of today. As for other types of literature, I like reading poetry. I would have you read a little [of it]. You get alot out of them. Short stories we will definatly cover some. I've read a little short story once and it taught me alot. I also find that reading up on current events is something that should be done. Reading things like George Will etc. Articles in Time, Newsweek *and* Reader's Digest. *I really think it's good to keep us [up] on things going on around you. I think I will have you write on things we read in class. Your output would be good. It would tell me how you think about certain kinds of literature. Your input will definatly help in my class. It will help me plan my class . . .*

Sincerely,
Tim (your teacher)

As the college students reexamined the language of their own letters, they began to see them as texts that, in effect, did create sociocultural contexts for their high school partners.

Each reflection on and reexamination of their own language prompted these college students to revisit the theorists whom they were studying in their assigned readings. They began to engage in new conversations (and debates) regarding ideas they were often certain they had completely understood and were in agreement with. Earlier in the semester, for example, before dealing with the voices of our Brians, these future teachers were certain they agreed with James Britton: dissonance and disagreement need to be explored as a part of the talk of the classroom. Now, after hearing the language of the real students, they were not sure that these voices needed to be heard in order for effective learning to occur.

We, too, debated this issue—and others. We viewed the letter writing as a "social act"; we scrutinized and analyzed the "honest conversation" which these sixty-three students "created" over a period of four months. And though we often argued about the merits and/or appropriateness of their creation, we had to agree that the very structure of this collaborative discourse had in some way provided the high school students with a position of power from which they were permitted a voice in which they could respond honestly. Each learner in this particular discourse community was truly a "teacher" of the others.

We saw, too, that the letter-writing structure enhanced a desire to connect with the "learner" rather than a desire to control. The drive to "get it right" (whatever that ambiguous educational "it" might be) seemed to be genuinely supplanted by the desire for connection. The high-school students needed to "connect" in order to teach the future teachers what they knew about real learning. The college students needed to "connect" in order to learn all they could from these "teachers" about literature, about reading, about learning, about motivation, and about their most not-so-secret desire: to become a great teacher.

In discussing the complex issue of literacy, Jay Robinson suggests that we reexamine the role of ethnography in the lives of our students (1990, 254):

> *A proper aim for writing programs in colleges and universities,* maybe even in schools *[emphasis ours], might well be to invite and help students to develop as ethnographers of thought—as careful and reflective participant-observers, critical thinkers of their own thoughts, able to reach beyond the constraints of discourse, able to escape from narrow perspectives, able to move from restricted and restricting ways of being and behaving in the world, able to assert and make a place for themselves as makers of meanings that are personally satisfying, no matter how constrained by the language they must use.*

In many ways, this four-month correspondence between "students" and "teachers" invited a social act that gave both groups of students the power to become ethnographers of their own thinking.

And, in some sense, it seems that we, too, as teacher-researchers in our forty-fifth year of combined classroom time, have accepted Jay Robinson's invitation. When we entered Ken Burke's "parlor" in September, our ears were perhaps "covered" by "curriculum" and by "appropriateness"; our student's voices were, perhaps, muted in those ears. Perhaps they still are. But each of us has come to realize that we will never be able to hear those voices clearly as long as we allow other voices to fill our heads. Crisis-management administrators, grade-happy parents, test-obsessed departments of education—all possess very loud voices. And those voices will continue to drown out those of our students until we, as a profession, learn how to stand up for the right to be able to hear theirs. Perhaps this project has "taught" us the most subtle irony of all: In order to be able to hear their voices, we need to develop one of our own.

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Struggling to Compose

How Children Regard Themselves as Writers

Anne Alpert

I began to think about my students. What did I really know about them as writers? Maybe instead of asking questions about their writing, I needed to ask them questions about themselves as writers.

Someone once told me, and I'm sure it was a teacher, that often it's more important to figure out the right questions than to come up with answers. I have been struggling for a long time with the problem of motivating children in my fifth grade class who produce very little writing. What was I failing to do for them that I seemed to be doing for the others?

I decided to concentrate on finding out what I was doing wrong. I began taping my conferences with the children I had labeled "reluctant writers" hoping that, by listening to my part in the conferences, I would find some answers. After hours and hours of taping and transcribing, I was no closer to any real insights than when I had started.

Tom

Ironically, a conference with one of my students, Tom, helped me to find some answers and pose some important questions. I had not taped my conferences with him because he was not one of those I had targeted as a reluctant writer. By March, when we had this conference, he had already published ten pieces. He is very cheerful about writing. He confers with friends often and loves to share his pieces with the class at whole group share—not at all what you would call "reluctant." I didn't tape the conference; this is approximately how it went.

Anne: What would you like me to help you with, Tom?

Tom: I'm publishing this piece.

Anne: How long have you been working on it?

Tom: Since Monday [two days].

Anne: Are you sure it's ready to be published?

Tom: Sure. I'm done.

Anne: Okay, let's hear it. (He reads the piece to me.)

Tom: Can I publish now?

Anne: Is there anything you want to add?

Tom: Nope, that's it.

Anne: What will you do next?

Tom: I'm going to write about going bowling with Rohan yesterday.

Anne: Tom, would you consider trying a different form of writing like those poems I've been reading to you, or a fairy tale?

Tom: I like this.

Anne: I know, and you work hard at writers' workshop. But you can mess around with different things, too.

Tom: Can I publish now?

Anne: It's your choice.

Tom: Okay. I'll publish.

I watched him saunter over to the computer to "publish" his piece and I realized that most of his conferences were like this. They were boring for both of us and I never felt very satisfied that we had accomplished much. After school, I decided to take out Tom's "Final Copy Folder" to see what he had published so far. All his pieces were

personal narratives, and all about his best friend, Rohan. They were all about the same length and pretty much the same level of complexity. Tom certainly wasn't a risk-taker and he had been resisting my suggestions for a long time. He had been turning out pieces, though, so why was I feeling so uneasy about him? After conferring with him all year long, I realized I really didn't know him as a writer.

I began to think about the three students I had been taping all these months. What did I really know about them as writers? Maybe instead of asking questions about their writing, I needed to ask them questions about themselves as writers. I decided to have individual conferences with each of them, very different conferences than I had been having. Here I present the conferences verbatim.

The first is with Jesus, the second with Samantha, the third with Ronnie. It is March, and so far in this school year Ronnie and Jesus have published one piece, and Samantha has published none.

Jesus

Jesus never initiates a conference with me, and I literally have to force him to meet me about every other week. I poke and prod him when we confer and he reacts by agreeing with everything I say just to get away from me.

ANNE: Read me what you have, Jesus, and then I want to ask you some questions.

Jesus reads his piece to me. It's about a mouse named Itchy who has adventures traveling around the world. In each place, he makes a new friend and the friend joins him on his travels. He has been working on the same piece all term. He makes lots of starts, puts it away, starts again. It seems to me, he never commits to anything.

ANNE: What do you think of it, Jesus?

JESUS: It's good, I guess.

ANNE: You don't sound too sure.

JESUS: What do you think?

ANNE: I think I talk too much when we have a conference. I want to hear what you think about writing.

JESUS: I like it. (Long silence. He's waiting for me to say something.) I like this Itchy character. I have to use the globe to find the countries he'll go to next . . . and then I look up the country to find out about it and make up his friends' names and stuff like that. I keep getting new ideas for new places. It's fun.

ANNE: That's what writers do all the time . . . they do research like you're doing.

JESUS: It takes time to do it . . . sometimes the whole writing period and I'm still not done. I read slow. Sometimes I have to ask Greg to help me with words.

ANNE: I see. What do you plan to do with your Itchy stories?

JESUS: It's a chapter book. Every chapter is a different place. I have six places already. But it's taking me long to put it all together.

ANNE: Read me the very first one you have.

JESUS: Why?

ANNE: I don't remember hearing it. Don't you want to?

JESUS: Okay. (He reads the first draft he started months ago. He stumbles where sentences end and begin and has to go back to correct himself.)

ANNE: Why is that happening?

JESUS: I don't have any periods. I can't use them when I write.

ANNE: How come?

JESUS: It stops me from thinking so I put them in after. I haven't done it yet.

ANNE: Oh . . . I see . . . It's good you know that about yourself.

JESUS: Yeah.

He continues reading his piece. It really is very funny. I realize I never asked him before why he was stumbling over words. I thought it was because he has difficulty reading and didn't want to embarrass him. He really is a good storyteller.

ANNE: You're a great storyteller. Did you know that about yourself?

JESUS: Yeah. I was trying to write poems and mysteries and stuff like you wanted us to write, but it's too hard for me. I like to write funny stuff like this. It's easier to write about animals than about people too. You laughed at all the right places, Anne.

ANNE: Was this a test?

JESUS: Yeah. (laughs)

ANNE: What will you do now?

JESUS: I think I'll try to bring Itchy home again and go back and see what I can change from the beginning. It might take me a long time.

ANNE: Should I wait for you to sign up for a conference when you're ready?

JESUS: Yeah. Sometimes I'm not ready when you call me.

ANNE: Okay. Thanks, Jesus.

I felt bewildered after this conference. What made him think that I wouldn't value his piece because it "wasn't as hard as a poem or a mystery"? And why didn't he tell me before why he wasn't ready for a conference when I called him? Why didn't he object to being called in the first place? The usual procedure for a conference with me was to

sign up when you needed one. The implication was that he couldn't be trusted to do that for himself. Why didn't I trust him?

Samantha

Samantha never wants to confer with me or with other children. I have to seek her out. She's very noncommittal at a conference. She always makes me feel as though I'm intruding on her privacy.

ANNE: What are you working on, Sam?

SAM: The same thing.

ANNE: Read me some.

She proceeds to read a piece she has started months ago. It's a "chapter book" about a brother and sister who decide to run away because their mother is getting married again and they hate their prospective stepfather and stepbrother. The first chapter is very well done. She has set up the characters very carefully. The second chapter, the one she is reading to me, is an elaborate explanation of how they plan to run away and where they're going to go. She reads slowly and methodically with very little expression or enthusiasm. She seems uncomfortable and angry at having to share it with me. She obviously wants to get it over with.

ANNE: I feel like you don't want to share this, Sam.

SAM: Well, I wasn't ready.

ANNE: Do you think I should wait until you sign up for a conference by yourself?

SAM: Yes. You don't call the other kids . . . just me. Why do you do that?

ANNE: I guess because I'm afraid you're not writing anything and I need to find out what you're doing. You haven't published anything all year.

SAM: So what? You said authors take a year . . . sometimes two years to write a book. Nobody tells them they have to publish seven books a year. I don't think you're being fair.

Stock photo by Elizabeth Crews

ANNE: How come you never told me that before?

SAM: Because nobody else seems to care about it.

ANNE: Oh.

SAM: You let everybody else sign up for a conference when they need it. Why don't you wait for me to be ready?

ANNE: Do you want to talk about your piece now?

SAM: Not really.

ANNE: Okay.

SAM: I'll sign up when I'm ready.

ANNE: Okay.

SAM: Maybe tomorrow or the next day.

ANNE: It's okay, Sam . . . really. I'm glad you told me how you feel.

SAM: You see, when I write, it takes me a long time to figure out how something ends up. I try it different ways in my mind, but only one way fits right. I have to do it with every chapter because there's something that happens in each chapter that leads to something else in the next chapter. I have to think about things a long time without writing anything.

ANNE: . . . and you don't need to talk to anyone to help you solve the problems.

SAM: No . . . it just interrupts me and I have to start thinking all over again.

ANNE: Oh . . . so when I call you for a conference, it just interrupts you.

SAM: (big sigh) Yes!

ANNE: Thanks, Sam . . . that's a big help to me.

SAM: Okay.

I've often told my students that writers make many starts and sometimes take a long time to finally come up with a piece of writing that satisfies them. By saying that, wasn't I giving them permission to take as long as they needed? If I meant that, then why did I decide to require seven published pieces? Is that why Samantha has seemed angry at me all this time?

Ronnie

Ronnie does everything but write at writers' workshop. Mostly he draws or reads or talks to other people about their writing. He loves to have peer conferences and he'll confer with anyone who asks him. He has produced one piece of writing, a fairy tale of some length that he worked on for about six weeks. He made many revisions and was very proud of the result. Since then, he hasn't produced anything.

ANNE: What's happening, Ron?

RON: I can't think of anything to write about.

ANNE: I know . . . that's what you tell me every time we have a conference. Don't any of my suggestions help you?

RON: No.

ANNE: Tell me how you get an idea for a piece?

RON: Myself?

ANNE: Yes.

RON: Why do you want to know?

ANNE: I don't know. . . . It occurred to me after listening to all the tapes of our conferences, I never asked you that and I really want to know.

RON: Well, it usually takes me a very long time. I never know when it hits . . . it just comes to me . . . bam . . . like that. Then I write and write and . . . like my fairy tale. I got the idea from Andy when she was telling me about this movie she saw and then it just hit me . . . just like lightning.

ANNE: Okay . . . so you get your idea and then you write and write and then what happens?

RON: After I publish, it's like I'm worn out . . . like when a balloon loses its air . . . just flat. I don't feel like writing again for a long time . . . so I do other stuff and just wait for another idea to hit me again.

ANNE: Is there any way to make the ideas come faster?

RON: I don't know. Do you know any?

ANNE: I guess not . . . the ways I knew I shared with you and they didn't seem to work.

RON: I know. I guess writers all have their own way and nobody can really help them.

ANNE: I guess real writers know that about themselves.

RON: What should I do now?

ANNE: What do you want to do?

RON: I think I'll read some more Shel Silverstein. I really like his poems.

ANNE: Okay. Let me know when another idea hits you.

RON: Okay. Thanks, Anne.

Ronnie was really happy with himself as a writer. So why was I feeling so frustrated all year? If he had been less independent and secure would I have felt more useful? What did all this have to do with Ronnie being labeled a reluctant writer?

The Purpose of Writers' Workshop

As I looked over my transcripts of past conferences with these three children, I realized my focus was constantly on ways to move them along to publish. I heard myself remind them over and over that they needed to publish seven pieces and they were nowhere near that number. I accused them, also, of doing nothing constructive at writing time, which, as you can see from these conferences, was the furthest thing from the truth. And most importantly, they knew themselves as writers much more intimately and intelligently than I did.

So then, what is a "reluctant" writer? Is writing a social act for everyone? What drove me to require a particular number of published pieces? Where was the ownership of the writer in that decision? Are we talking about "writing" or about "composing"? And if we're talking about "composing," isn't it much more than "writing"?

It seems clear to me now that "writing" is only one piece of the puzzle that is "composing." I should have known that from my own experiences struggling to compose. Composing is the getting ready to take the risk; it's the struggling to develop an idea; it's the self-doubt, the inner critic constantly challenging you; it's all the revision that happens before you ever get a word down on paper. Composing is the thinking, the problem solving, the choices. It's the totality of every act that finally produces "writing." And this whole process is so different for each one of us.

If all of this is so, then what is the purpose and value of writers' workshop? Is it to help children to know themselves as writers, or is it to publish? That question is rhetorical since one of the revelations that came to me "like lightning" is that writers' workshop time is for helping my students see themselves as writers and be secure with what they know. Publishing is important if the writer thinks it's important, but it's no more important than any other piece of the composing process. It took these three children all term to get up the courage to tell me who they are. I read in a "teacher book" that children decide what is important not by what you say, but by what you do. My message to these children was that publishing is writing. These three children had the courage to resist me so that they could be

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When a Student Hands Me a Line Like This

Georgia Tiffany

An impulsive act that had originally been intended as an effort to celebrate the poetry of one class has become a tradition. Now, every year my students ask, "When are you going to write our poem?"

Blue is an ice cream headache.

When a student hands me a line like this, how can I help but love it? Immediately the class comes alive. Songs from the blue guitar, green wind in a grandfather's palm, blue-green sugar spilling out of the sun, blue, green, blue sundown, green dusk, blue-green sleep, blue . . . green . . . blue-green.

A huge sugar pot she flung against the dried continent.

That night I dream I am dancing like sugar through dark sap. And when I wake up I am tasting line after line, poem after poem after poem. Writing startles us into question. From moment to moment it affirms the question in the mirror.

I can almost taste the broken glass.

Every class I have ever taught, every class I will ever teach, has a heartbeat. And when lines like this touch us, it seems that inside that heartbeat lies the energy of the universe, and inside that energy, moments that propel meaning into our lives.

And now you open like a red tree.

How can I thank them for the questions, for the heartbeat; for the hawk spiraling toward me *from the underbelly of a gray-blue cloud; for stars beating faster than my pulse;* for *the smell of Grandmother's just washed hair.* Their images rush at me.

They are searching the eye of the world.

When a student hands me a line like this . . .

At the end of school five years ago, in search of thanksgiving and a good-bye that would in some way let them know how much our writing and discoveries together meant to me, from each student's final portfolio I began selecting random lines that startled me into question, lines that challenged or caressed, lines flung against the continent of our semester's journey. The process of gathering seemed sinfully delightful, as delightful as picking flowers from a cottage garden.

Since then, every year, the experience evokes strong emotion and the poem I create from their lines has been every bit as meaningful as that first time. Perhaps teachers, like poets, work in an echo. When echoes resonate, there's a passion that touches us, a passion greater than the sum of its parts.

This year, as I was reading the final portfolios, I tried to limit myself to no more than ten lines from each student. Some were surprises from revisions I'd never seen, others I had read or heard in various forms during the semester. Once I had finished the portfolio evaluations, I printed out the collection of student lines I had gathered and read and reread them, marking the ones which shouted at me, looking for one with which to begin. Almost immediately, Char's lines seemed comfortable, a natural way for me to begin, a way to distance my impending loss, that loss teachers inevitably feel at the end of every year when young people we have grown to love are leaving.

Outside, a willow leaf twirls in the wind.
Sun filters through its fragile skin,
then breaks against the dirt-smeared window.

Yes. The sun was attempting to throw some light. I immediately saw my classroom, and Dan's image of *the dusty windowsill lined with Mountain Dew cans.* Almost immediately other lines began calling for each other.

Patrick's poem, "Camouflage," about a student who is trying unsuccessfully to fit in, begins with *I'm crying in the back corner of the classroom.* I knew the spirit of that student somehow needed to be in my poem, as well as sections from Brianna's lines, *As you bend over your work/I can't take my eyes off you./ You glance my way, a wrinkle of concentration has burrowed its way into your forehead.*

Courtney's *exit like kisses* and *pain spiders across my heart* had haunted me since the first time they crossed my desk. I knew they would eventually insist on being a part of my poem.

Because so many of the students filled their writing with evocative images, I had a wonderful selection to choose from. Jennifer writes almost entirely out of the image experience. From her poem "Swallowing Memories" came many possibilities.

Red like the meat of guava fruit,
the sun sinks into the sandy belly of the sea.
I sit on the outstretched finger of lava—
and watch hungry waves swallow
more of the beach.
From a barricade of trees,
pulmaria flowers, their scent
like the taste of brown sugar,
float lazily down to my bare feet.
I tuck a white star
behind my ear.
The tide swallows the shell-freckled shore,
swallows footprints,
mine and the tiny black crab's.

A Teacher's Lament in Springtime

Georgia Tiffany

For my creative writing students, June 2000

Outside, a willow leaf twirls in the wind.
Sun filters through the fragile skin
then breaks against a dirt-smeared window,
the sill lined with Mountain Dew cans.
I see a hawk spiral toward me
from the underbelly of a gray-blue cloud.

Just this side of light,
you move down the hall, your shadows
bending past the library, turning the corner
in one fluid human movement,
and stand frozen in the doorway gazing into the room.
Am I dreaming?

I have imagined the leaf, the sun, the cloud.
I have imagined the hawk. Have I imagined you?
The universe dims and starts to go dark,
darkness floating in
on this dusty June night.
Perhaps I never did understand the rules of the game.

How long have I sat at this same desk,
how long have I taught in this same windowless room
with these same filing cabinets
and stacks of papers,
with these same ideas as old as ink?
Can I recycle them forever?

And now you sit on the floor turning pages of the album,
your hands shaking, and mine.
And now you bend over your work, glance my way,
a wrinkle of concentration burrowed into your forehead.
You say you are searching the eye of the world.
Because light reflects off my glasses, I cannot see your eyes.

In fact, the paints must have smeared
because now the whole picture's blurry.
And now, you are crying in the back corner of the classroom.
And now you open like a red tree,
your eyes weighted down with twin flames of stone.
Stars fall to the ground like broken glass.

I tuck a white star behind my ear, a black crab,
a one-armed teddy bear,
your images rushing at me like the rain that's beginning,
rolling down the skylight,
and I strain to hold my eyes open, afraid if I blink
you'll disappear.

Always alone in these shadows, I stare at my English book,
pages marked with paper clips,
and try to forget the dark is even here.
You exit like kisses.
Pain spiders across my heart.
I stand still and listen to the silent school breathing.

The last line of my poem came from Jessica's villanelle, "Moving On," about a young woman leaving her alcoholic husband. In the permission we gave ourselves with the form, one of her repeated lines changes from *and focused only on breathing* to *she focuses only on breathing* to *she focuses on his heavy breathing.* Jessica's poem ends like this:

Packed bags on the porch,
she takes her daughter's hand.
He stands still by the doorway
listening to the silent house breathing.

Because I, too, was focused on breathing—focused on that end-of-the-year breathing, that rhythm—and because Jessica had altered the breathing line each stanza to fit her poem, it seemed not only that her discovery was becoming my discovery, but that I, too, could change her lines to the extent they ended my poem in as significant a way as they ended hers. Originally I wrote, "I stand still in the doorway/listening to the silent breathing." Then, for the sake of the poem, particularly because these lines were the ending, I did take the liberty of eliminating *by the doorway* and substituted *school* for *house.* Jessica recognized her lines, of course, and thought it was "neat" how I'd used them to end the poem.

At the end of their portfolio presentations the following week, I read the poem to my students, meeting the eyes of each one as I recited his or her respective line or lines. Sometimes I swallowed to avoid tears. They sat silently solemn. And then . . . and then . . .

An impulsive act that had originally been intended as an effort to celebrate the poetry of one class has become a tradition. Now, every year my students ask, "When are you going to write our poem?" I suspect that after the first year's experience, as student writing begins to take shape over the semester, certain lines, like Courtney's *exit like kisses,* lie dormant somewhere in my subconscious ready to emerge in this annual thanksgiving poem. But the ease with which such a poem comes together, usually in less than four hours, still surprises me and reaffirms my suspicions that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin knew what he was talking about.

In "Building the Earth" (1965, 31) Chardin asks, "How can we unite all the positive values of civilization in a totality which will also respect individual values?" He answers: "Since everything in the universe, starting from Man, takes place in the personalized being, the ultimate Term of the universal Convergence must also possess (in a supreme degree) the quality of a Person" (61).

I'm sure Chardin did not have writing such a poem in mind when he made this statement. But I'm thinking that the connection is possible. Is each of us all the time in the act of composition, that ongoing emergence? Is the act of writing a convergence, as Chardin says, "the perfection and usefulness of each nucleus of human energy in relation to the whole"?

Continuously on our watch for ways to enlarge our consciousness, are we as writers together searching for the eye of the world?

It's a mystery, as poetry itself is a mystery, as each student is a mystery. An "I" in the middle of the eye. I'll probably never understand the mystery, except to understand how meaningful for me as a writing teacher to be able to find a nucleus in the energy of writing, the reciprocity of that energy, an affirmation of the writing process.

And so, once again this year, I say good-bye to my students with a poem (see page 15), constructed almost entirely of lines from their writing. With the permission of my students, they become the poem.

Reference

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. 1965. *Building the Earth.* Wilkes-Barre, PA: Dimension Books.

Note: Italicized lines in the context of the text are from the following student writers in the order in which they appear: Jillian Smith, Chihiro Mochizuki, Stacy Brickner, Courtney Ericksen, Beth Willard, Brianna Nash, Dan Absalonson, Char Balyeat. In addition to these students, other students whose lines appear in the poem "A Teacher's Lament in Springtime" are Jeni Motoyoshi, Trisha Sleeth, Jake Romney, Jessica Fiedler, Claire Cruver, Thomas Caster, Jennifer Harper, Pat Brandenburg, Jessica Roys, Kristina Alton, Emily Pollock.

Georgia Tiffany's poems have appeared in *South Dakota Review, The Malahat Review, Willow Springs, Orbis, Poetry Ireland, Fugue, North Dakota Quarterly, Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review,* and many other journals. She is included in the Washington University Press anthology of Northwest Poets, *Deep Down Things.* She lives in Spokane, Washington, where she teaches world literature and philosophy, humanities, and creative writing. Her students have won local, regional, and national writing awards contiguously for the last twelve years. She is a teacher-consultant with the Northwest Inland Writing Project at the University of Idaho.

Teachers at the Center

A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Writing Project

James Gray

Nineteen seventy-four was a big year for writing education in America. That summer, at the first summer institute of the first writing project site in the country, Jim Gray put into action a radically new idea about teacher education—that successful classroom teachers make the best teachers of other teachers. In this excerpt from his new book, Teachers at the Center, *he offers a refreshing glimpse into the people, experiences, and practices that helped him shape the writing project model.*

There we were—twenty-nine of us, counting the codirectors and myself—on a Monday morning in the summer of 1974, the first day of the first invitational institute of the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP).

Present in the room were Miles Myers, the Oakland high school teacher who would one day become executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English, and Mary Ann Smith, the young woman who twenty-five years later would serve as codirector of the National Writing Project, as well as her team-teaching colleague, Jo Fyfe, a future associate director of the project.

There also were Bill Brandt of the UC Berkeley rhetoric department, who believed the key to strong writing was a carefully crafted topic sentence, and Sandy Seale, who was teaching her inner-city students to "code switch" long before the term was coined. Also present were future BAWP codirector Mary K. Healy, then a middle school teacher and Ph.D. candidate who had studied in England with the great literacy theoretician and researcher James Britton, and Cap Lavin, the legendary University of San Francisco basketball great who was in the process of becoming a legendary teacher of English.

Walking into the room, one teacher, Joan Christopher, could not believe her eyes. "I really didn't think anyone would be there," she told me later. "I was thinking maybe I was the only teacher in the world who cared about teaching writing."

This was an exciting but very bumpy time as we began to bring together the key elements of the model.

We were reluctant to ask everyone to give a demonstration, but the teachers who did show us their successful classroom practices confirmed our belief that the summer institute would cross-pollinate the successful teaching of writing as perhaps no other structure could.

Barney Tanner, the San Mateo County high school teacher whom I had known for many years, gave a presentation on coherence. It was the kind of smart, ordered, and useful presentation one might have expected from a man dedicated to prodding his students toward successful academic writing.

But the presentation by Mary Ann Smith and Jo Fyfe, who were team teaching at Loma Vista Intermediate Junior High School, must have given Barney something to think about. In their classroom, they had been using the James Moffett *Interaction* series, which drew on booklets and activity cards, readings and prompts, and which introduced students to many forms of creative and real-world writing: letter writing, autobiographical writing, playwriting, and limericks, for instance. Mary Ann and Jo were committed to Moffett's key pedagogical idea: students need to experiment with genres, finding topics that interest them and working at their own pace. They explained Moffett's ideas and showed us examples of student work and a video of their own classroom in action. This concept was far ahead of the thinking of many of the high school and college

teachers present at the institute. They, like almost all teachers at the time, had for the most part operated behind closed doors. We had brought together the most talented teachers we could find, yet as I was to understand over time, even teachers of this caliber have a lot to learn from one another.

One demonstration in particular opened our eyes. Kate Blickhahn, a teacher at Sir Francis Drake High School in Marin County, who would become principal of a neighboring school, demonstrated the concept of holistic scoring. This process allowed student writing to be assessed and ranked according to an agreed-upon rubric and in comparison to other students. It had been used at College Board readings for some time. However, it was a concept foreign to most classroom teachers. Not everyone present that day felt comfortable with the idea that a piece of student writing could be assessed without marking it up. But Kate explained that the purpose of holistic scoring at the school level was not to comment on an individual student's mastery of subject-verb agreement, but to give teachers, departments, and schools information that they could use to strengthen their writing programs. Everyone present that day took away from Kate's demonstration something they had not thought of before.

Jim Gray leads the first writing project summer institute in 1974.

Though the key elements of the summer institute were in place from the beginning, we made some major mistakes. For instance, during the first year of the summer institute, we failed to include elementary teachers. We were so focused on the secondary-only National Defense Education Act model, and on our goal to establish a project that would improve the writing levels of high school graduates, that we didn't even consider the idea of a kindergarten through university mix. We should have known better. The need to attend to writing crosses all grade levels. Therefore, the work of all writing teachers on the kindergarten through university continuum is equally important to all other writing teachers. By the second institute, we had corrected our error and included teachers at all grade levels. We understood that teachers are naturally curious about the learning in other classrooms and at other grade levels, and yet they seldom have the chance to find out what's really going on in any classroom other than their own.

I remember one twelfth grade teacher who introduced his demonstration by stating that it probably wouldn't be of any interest or use to anyone but the other senior high school or college teachers, a remark he came to regret. "Don't tell me what won't work in my classes!" the elementary teachers told him in so many words. After another demonstration, a teacher responded with what she thought was the pointed criticism: "I could do that with my fourth-graders!" But most present understood that yes, she could, but eleventh-graders would come at the same learning from different intellectual places and different levels of experience. This is one reason eleventh grade teachers and fourth grade teachers are able to share ideas. Whenever an elementary teacher asked me what time the doors to Tolman Hall, the building where we met, opened in the morning, I knew exactly what was going to happen. When we walked into our room on such a morning, we would see a room transformed into a replica of the teacher's own classroom, sometimes complete with puppets to play with, hats to wear, horns to toot, and whistles to blow. College teachers were fascinated by elementary teachers, and a bit envious also. They couldn't get over the color and decoration of their classrooms—all of it of educational interest—and the joy of these rooms compared to the totally sterile rooms they taught in, which usually had no decoration at all and nothing on the bulletin board but one old flyer for a concert held years earlier.

The Bay Area Writing Project model created an environment where both academics and classroom teachers could appreciate each other. Professors of English and of English education worked as partners and colleagues of classroom teachers. For teachers, BAWP was a university-based program that recognized—even celebrated—teacher

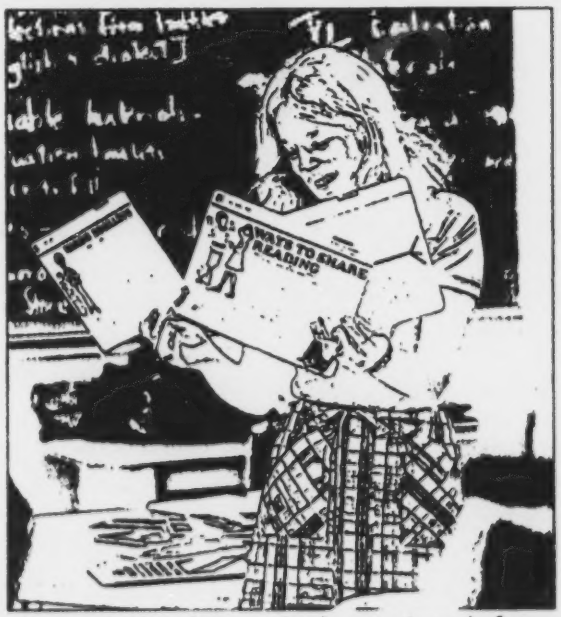
expertise. For academics and teachers alike, the Bay Area Writing Project model managed to reverse the top-down, voice-from-Olympus model of so many past university efforts at school reform.

Much of what we did during the first years was experimental and tentative. Now we require all participants to do a teaching demonstration and to write and share their writing. Some teachers never did make a presentation, and some were very slow in letting others see what they had written. Feeling our way, we didn't believe we were in a position to hold to rigid requirements.

Similarly, we became ambivalent about another of our initial requirements, that all summer fellows conduct a voluntary workshop for the teachers in their own schools or district during the follow-up year. We were concerned about the Prophet in his Own Land problem, but also, as the first invitational summer institute ran its course, we became aware for the first time that all of the great teachers we had brought together were not going to be equally great teachers of other teachers. We were finding out that teaching teachers was an altogether different art form, and an exceptional seventh grade teacher is not necessarily going to be an exceptional teacher of seventh grade teachers. Some summer fellows did not like to give presentations and never would; they would do something else to stay involved. Many simply needed more time and practice before they were ready to face other teachers.

In the Right Spot at the Right Time

Thinking back on those early days, I understand that much of the early success of the writing project can be traced to being in the right spot at the right time. The right spot was a major and highly esteemed public university such as the University of California at Berkeley with its long tradition of public service. The right time was the mid-1970s, when the "Why Johnny Can't Write" stories began to appear in the nation's press: *Newsweek* published shocking samples of students' (and teachers') writing; *Time* reported that the decline in writing abilities was not just a problem of entering freshmen at UC Berkeley but a problem at universities nationwide; *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in the report "The Crisis in English Writing," published similar findings; and in 1975, the press began reporting stories documenting a decline in SAT scores. As reporters investigated these stories, they also began asking what was being done in the nation to attack these problems, and as they looked around, they found the Bay Area Writing Project was the only visible program in place.



Mary Ann Smith conducts a teacher demonstration at the first summer institute.

As national concern grew, so did interest in the writing project. The resulting press coverage brought—in addition to letters, phone calls, and invitations to speak—a steady number of visitors from other universities.

Stories also began appearing in popular journals and magazines, such as *Readers' Digest*, *Education Today*, and *Woman's Day*. The *New York Times* sent a reporter to the Bay Area to do a story about the writing project. So numerous were the BAWP stories in newspapers and magazines that J. N. Hook, former executive secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English, once asked me, "Who's handling your public relations?"

The Project's First Grant Proposal

In the spring prior to the first BAWP summer institute, I wrote a proposal that I submitted to eight foundations identified by UC Berkeley's Sponsored Projects Office. I was seeking funding for a project that had not yet begun, had not been tested, and had not been fine-tuned in any way. This derring-do was not lost on the reviewers. But I was optimistic. The writing project idea, however described, was exciting stuff, and in the proposal I referred to the "successful Bay Area Writing Project" from these earliest of our beginnings. But instead of receiving award letters that summer, I opened a series of rejection letters. The letter from the National Endowment for the Humanities rejected the proposal because it stated, "Writing is not a part of the humanities"! That caused some stir among the institute teachers.

But we did get a call from Alden Dunham, program officer at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, requesting a time when he could meet with us during a trip to California. We were all very excited; funding from just one of the eight was all we needed, and that the Carnegie Corporation of New York wanted to discuss our proposal was promising indeed. Bill Brandt, Cap Lavin, Merle Borowman (dean of the School of Education), and I met Dunham in the dean's office. Alden Dunham, elegant, impressive, and always to the point, was aware of the writing problem, as it was beginning to surface in various parts of the country, and possibly because he was a UC Berkeley graduate, he was clearly interested in UC Berkeley doing something to solve the problem. But he was not interested in our proposal. We had expected great news, but what we got from Alden was a critique on the proposal's shortcomings. Alden told us that he reviewed proposals by looking closely at the budget and the evaluation sections. Turning to the pages on evaluation, Alden asked, "Who wrote this? Who wrote this section?" I said I had. And Alden said, "Well, you know nothing about evaluation. Get somebody who does to help you write this section. Get Michael Scriven. He's at Berkeley. You can't get anyone better than Michael."

Janice Davis, Sandy Seale, and Jo Fyfe, among the first BAWP participants, enjoy a light moment.

The meeting had not gone as we had hoped. I was embarrassed and disappointed. However, it didn't take long to realize that the sum of Alden's pointed comments really added up to an invitation to resubmit, but with the caution—and the directions!—to do it right the next time. Alden was right in rejecting the first proposal: the project was not ready to be funded, and we had accomplished nothing at all at the time we had submitted it. All of us were determined to submit a second proposal, but not until we had the working evidence to support our claim that we had an idea that would dramatically alter staff development education of teachers. It was not until 1976–77 that we wrote a proposal we were proud to submit.

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On the last afternoon of the last day of the first summer institute, Cap Lavin and I really didn't know what lay ahead. Our effort to raise money had been a bust—seven rejections with one no-response out of eight submissions. It seemed unlikely that the Bay Area Writing Project idea of teachers teaching teachers would ever be realized. We had five hundred dollars remaining in our account. As we walked down to the parking lot, I turned to Cap and said, "Let's play Let's Pretend. What would we be doing now if we had been funded?" We came up with the idea of blowing the whole five hundred dollars on a cocktail party and dinner in the UC Berkeley Men's Faculty Club for administrators from the schools and districts of the summer fellows. We could talk about the increasing seriousness of the writing problem. We could describe what UC Berkeley could do to help through the Bay Area Writing Project. The teachers could give us the names of key administrators who would likely be interested in what we would have to say.

We talked it over with Rod Park, provost and dean of the College of Letters and Science, and invited him to say a few words about the university's interest in working with schools as partners in this collaborative effort. Park liked the idea and offered to cover any expenses over five hundred dollars. We arranged for a private room in the Faculty Club, and all but one of those invited showed up.

A waiter moved around the group with a tray of cocktails, and we began to have an enjoyable time. But I was new at this, and I didn't know about how the club handled such affairs. I hadn't given them a specific time to stop the flow of drinks and start the

dinner service, so the tray of cocktails continued to make the rounds. One thing led to another as the mood became more festive than informative. Park said a few words, and I started talking about our plans, but I had the distinct impression no one was listening. However, I was to learn that a powerful idea can survive even missteps such as this. During that first year, BAWP received eight invitations to conduct workshops in the schools, though none, I'm afraid, from those in attendance at our dinner.

The Poly High Debacle

Our first invitation was for a workshop at San Francisco's Polytechnic High School. The principal invited me to bring some teachers who had participated in the first summer's program to talk to the English department. I handpicked a strong group: Cap Lavin, BAWP's codirector; Miles Myers, a highly regarded Oakland high school teacher; and Flossie Lewis, a teacher at San Francisco's esteemed Lowell High School. Poly was not esteemed at the time. The papers regularly carried stories of faculty unrest and political and social tension on the campus. We weren't really surprised to find graffiti-filled halls. One inscription shouted at us, "Black is Beautiful; Yellow is Mellow; White is Shit." The teachers were waiting for us. I introduced my colleagues and began describing what the Bay Area Writing Project was all about. Suddenly, I was hit in the face by a paper wad thrown by some guy sitting in the second row. I ignored it and plowed ahead. Another paper wad. I was dumbfounded. Here we were, excited by this first invitation and the start, we hoped, of a long line of such invitations, and things were out of control. I reasoned that the situation could only get better, so I continued on. Another paper wad! Miles jumped out of his seat, went to the board, and began charting out some plan or model when someone else in the room shouted out: "Miles, go on back to Oakland where you belong!" Cap and Flossie were agitated. Cap, who suffered from angina, popped a nitroglycerin pill; Flossie was close to tears. Nothing made sense. The paper wad thrower shouted: "Gimmie some pencils! If you want to help us, give us some pencils; we can always use pencils." The workshop was clearly over, and the four of us left the room.

We went across the street to a bar and tried to figure out what had happened. It should not have happened—not with the group I put together. All three of the teachers were well known and even revered in San Francisco. Cap was raised in San Francisco, where he had become a basketball legend. Miles was the senior vice president of the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) and the founder and editor of *California Teacher,* the CFT newspaper these teachers would have read in this strong union town. And Flossie Lewis was one of their own—one of the best-known, most-respected, and feistiest English teachers in town. It was beyond understanding why we'd been treated that way. The following week, one of the teachers called me. It seemed that the principal, a very unpopular *acting* principal who was at war with the faculty, had told teachers to show up for this workshop or else! The teachers showed up, not only to keep their files clean of reprimands, but also to get even by keeping this program from succeeding. They had nothing against us. They didn't know me. They did know Cap and Miles and Flossie, and they liked all of them. But they hated that acting principal.

That afternoon, we learned something about how to conduct a Bay Area Writing Project workshop and how not to. We vowed never again to have anything to do with mandated programs. Our workshops for teachers would from then on always be voluntary. If teachers didn't want to attend a Bay Area Writing Project workshop, they didn't have to, and we would make this very clear to teachers and administrators.

BAWP Bombs at Acalanes

There are many ways for a workshop to go wrong, and our next workshop for the Acalanes School District led to another misadventure. We had learned from the institute that a demonstration should not be entirely a lecture—that teachers in the workshop need to participate in the activity and respond just as students do. But the director of English of the Acalanes School District had another idea. I was so impatient to get something going, I was quite willing to do what the district wanted, that is: "Bring along your *hotshots,* four or five of your best teachers, not just one," the director said, "and have each of them briefly present what it is they do to teach writing." My instincts told me that a series of "Here's what I do" sessions would not work, but I knew how strong the teachers were, and I believed they might pull it off.

When I arrived at the district office, "hotshots" in tow, and entered our meeting room, I looked out onto a large room, cold and intimidating, filled with hard chairs set out in rigid rows. We faced a roomful of teachers who also seemed cold and intimidating. The director of English handled the introductions: "Teacher One, Teacher Two, Teacher Three, Teacher Four," he said, like his guests were contestants on the *Dating Game.* It was terrible. Our teachers had never faced anything like this before. They stood like sticks and hardly knew what to say, racing through their little talks like shy twelve-year-olds rather than the professionals they were. The next day, the director of English who had planned this fiasco

distributed his curriculum newsletter to teachers and administrators throughout the district with the headline "BAWP BOMBS." I had the feeling he enjoyed putting that newsletter together, that he didn't mind at all seeing the "hotshots" lose a round. But we had learned another lesson. We had been asked to do something we did not want to do. We would not do it again.

BAWP Discovers Its Inservice Model

Our next workshop was to give us a model for the way we would conduct staff development from then on. Shortly after our early mishaps, I received a phone call from Vi Tallman, language arts coordinator for the Stanislaus County Office of Education, inviting me to conduct a UC Extension course on the teaching of writing. I had taught such a course on two previous occasions, and the county office wanted to continue this focus on writing. I told Vi a little about the new project we had at Berkeley and asked if she would mind if I handled the course a little differently this time by bringing along some of the outstanding teachers I had worked with during our recent institute. Vi didn't care how I handled it: "Anything you want. Anything." I made the trip to Modesto alone for the first session, but for each of the next nine weeks I arranged to chauffeur a different teacher from the institute—Miles Myers, Mary K. Healy, Barney Tanner, Cap Lavin, Keith Caldwell, and others—to the Stanislaus County Office on Thursday afternoons to conduct a three-hour workshop on the teaching of writing. I taxied each of the nine teachers to Modesto and back, a distance of about two hundred miles, took them all out to dinner, and from the thousand dollars I received from the county office for teaching the course, I wrote a personal check for fifty dollars to each of the teacher-consultants. I kept what was left as my share for serving as series coordinator. I thought this was fair all around. The early bookkeeping for the project was casual.

The audience of Modesto teachers had never experienced a program anything like this before: real classroom teachers demonstrating their own practices—approaches that fellow teachers had found successful in their own classrooms, one great teacher after another for ten straight weeks. Each week they were introduced to something new about teaching writing. Each week, in these three-hour sessions, they were given the time to experiment with these different teaching practices by doing the writing that students would do and then reading what they had written to other teachers in small response groups. After two or three weeks, I always gave some time over to the teachers so they could comment on how well these different practices had worked in their own classrooms in the preceding week, and these comments usually triggered further discussions about the teaching of writing.

For many, this was the first time they had ever come together with a group of fellow teachers to talk about writing and the teaching of writing. They loved it. They began talking about this new class to other teachers. A few local school administrators who were also beginning to hear about what was happening on Thursday afternoons began showing up. Vi became a regular guest along with one of her colleagues from the county office; even the county superintendent of schools attended one session. And so it began. BAWP was at work in the schools, and it had discovered its program design in Modesto: ten three-hour sessions, adding up to the thirty-hour UC Extension requirement for credit; a different classroom teacher as instructor at each workshop; and a coordinator who had an active role at each session. Over the next eight years, BAWP was invited to conduct four additional series in Modesto. The Merced County Office, having heard about this new UC Berkeley project at county office meetings, invited BAWP to do the same for the next two years—even Fresno County wanted BAWP, but the location was too far away.

Something was happening in the world of staff development. BAWP had established an aura. The telephone began to ring, and BAWP has been scheduling multiple inservice programs throughout the Bay Area ever since.

The Second Summer Institute

We did some fine-tuning for the second institute, to improve how we handled the demonstrations, the writing, and the response groups. But we didn't fine-tune enough. The second summer institute came close to being a total disaster, and that we didn't die right then and there clearly speaks to the power of the writing project's teacher-centered model to withstand and overcome even major disruptions.

The major disruption the second summer was a giant of a man with heavy curly black hair and a full black mustache who dressed—every day—in full black leather. He was also a magnificent writer whose prized possession was his motorcycle. That summer he wrote stunning pieces about the feel and thrill of riding fast on quiet country roads, windblown and free. He was an assistant professor of English at UC Berkeley with particular interest in seventeenth-century English poetry—and he was the most difficult human being I've ever had to deal with. Each morning he'd come late to the institute, stand in the doorway, glowering and scowling, looking for a chair, frequently disrupting whatever was going on—often nothing he was much interested

in anyway. When he was bored or turned off, he sometimes would reach down into his black leather briefcase, pull out *Rolling Stone*, and begin reading. When he heard teachers say things about writing or teaching that he disagreed with, he would let us all know about it in some way or other, even to the point of yelling out "Bullshit!" He was, for many, totally intimidating. Yet, I couldn't believe that I couldn't fix things somehow. After all, I had twenty years of teaching experience behind me by this time, and I had dealt with difficult students, but nothing I had experienced in those earlier days helped me this time. He was clearly making many teachers uncomfortable, and on occasion had some close to tears. And yet while some found him a challenge, others found him fascinating.

One day early in the institute this problem professor gave a formal presentation, standing behind a podium that he had brought with him and reading a paper prepared for the occasion on the overuse of the verb "to be," the only time any teacher or any guest has read a formal paper in the history of the Bay Area Writing Project. His take on "to be" led to a heated argument. One teacher spent that evening looking up every memorable passage he could find in poetry and prose featuring some form of "to be" and made copies that he passed around to all the next morning.

Some savored these electric exchanges, some were clearly attracted to him personally, and a good number of teachers agreed wholeheartedly with his insistence that the institute should focus solely upon improving the writing of the expository and argumentative essay. But another sizable group argued strongly for personal writing and for giving students the freedom to write about whatever they wanted to write about. It was in this sharp division that I found the solution.

Either the next day or the day after, I told the group of a major change I was making. We would divide the institute for the rest of the summer into two totally separate groups that could focus on their own interests, meeting in different rooms and coming together only for guest speakers and our weekly Thursday evening pot luck dinners. The teachers were more than satisfied and, strangely enough, did not think this drastic solution odd. They even gave each other pet names: the Hard-Noses and the Touchy-Feelies.

The experiment of the two institutes in two different rooms might have satisfied the teachers, but once I set it up, I found it impossible. It simply was not true to the heart of the project. The project I had envisioned was about talented teachers coming together and sharing their expertise, respecting and learning from their varied approaches. It was not about choosing up sides about how or what to teach. At the end of the fourth week, I called a halt to this 1975 summer institute. It was tearing the model apart. I invited everyone to a backyard barbecue at my home with plenty of good food and drink—which seemed to give our time together that summer a happy ending.

Looking back, I understand that this disaster (at least it seemed so at the time) might have been avoided if we had had in place the interview process that by the third year had become a key element of the summer institute. But for the first two years, interviews were not part of our selection process. For our first institute, I invited many of the teachers I had worked with in one way or another and knew to be excellent, and those I had not known were recommended by colleagues I respected. The summer fellows the following year were selected in much the same way, but when that difficult institute was over, I knew from then on we would have a selection process with the final cut based on a personal interview. Ever since, we have used the interview to learn a great deal about each teacher, and to give teachers a chance to learn more about BAWP. We talk about the special nature of our teacher-centered project, and teachers talk about their approaches to teaching writing, telling us what they do and why they do it. But this experience during the second summer institute taught us we were not looking for only the "hotshots." We were looking for teachers who can respect and learn from their talented colleagues, who can accept our assumption that there is no single best way to teach writing. Initiating a selection process the third year turned out to be a major event in the refinement of the Bay Area Writing Project model.

Reflecting now on the ups and downs of our first year, I am tempted to say of some of our misturns, "Why didn't we think of that? It seems so obvious." Yet at the time nothing was obvious. Everything was new. We discovered during this early struggle a teachers-at-the-center model relevant then, now, and in the future.

James Gray enjoyed a distinguished career as an English teacher and teacher-educator before he launched the Bay Area Writing Project in 1974. For the next twenty years, he worked to advance the writing project model, which now flourishes at 167 NWP sites at colleges and universities in forty-nine states. Gray retired as NWP executive director in 1994, but remains active as a member of NWP's board of directors.

Reprinted from Teachers at the Center: A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Writing Project, *available from NWP.*

Bicultural Literacy

A Personal Exploration

Marcia Venegas-García

My grandfather would return from work and, after dinner, invite me to sit on his lap to read La Opinion. *On those occasions, I imagined myself reading. My eyes searched unrelentingly to locate the exact place where his eyes met the print. Sometimes I thought I had found the exact spot, but I was not always sure unless I asked and he pointed.*

If it is true that people are shaped by the total of their life experiences, then it is likely also true that professional identities and ideologies form in the same way. Who was it that said, "We teach who we are?"

I am informed by my experiences and observations as a teaching professional in and out of schools. In educational environments, particularly policy-making environments, there is little written or verbal discussion of bicultural experiences such as mine, experiences similar to those of many of the students I have taught. In this essay, then, I want to reflect on the complex nature of my own literacy, or biliteracy, and suggest a broader concept of literacy, one that validates those experiences within the family setting that may be outside of the mainstream experience but important to the print and oral literacy experience nevertheless.

Though I am a Latina, I cannot remember a time during my developmental years that I have not been surrounded by both Spanish and English mixed with urban community dialects. My parents both spoke English primarily. Since they worked full time, I came to spend many days and some months each year with my Spanish-speaking grandparents. At other times, I listened to my parents read stories to me in English, not unlike Anglo children who also grew up in Los Angeles in the years following World War II.

It was in the home of my mother's parents that I began to understand my bicultural self and to form the attitudes that affect my educational philosophy and performance as a teacher and leader.

My earliest memories of literacy events took place mostly in the large living room and adjoining kitchen of my grandparents' home in a central Los Angeles neighborhood inhabited primarily by immigrant Chinese, Italian, Russian, and Mexican, with a sprinkling of African-American families, and mixed marriages across these groups. Here most residents owned their own homes and took pride in that fact. My grandmother chose this multicultural place because of the clean, well-maintained streets and yards.

Four of my mother's brothers, all of whom had fought in the war, lived in the large house, working by day and gathering around the dinner table at night. Speaking only Spanish, my grandmother, a formidable matriarch whose school years were cut short because she was needed to care for an ailing mother, told captivating stories about her girlhood in Mexico and about her journey in 1912, when she was sixteen, with her family, through Tijuana and San Ysidro to Los Angeles. Over the years, she lived in three homes in Los Angeles and returned to her birthplace in Irapuato, Guanajuato only once. Eventually, she learned to speak English fluently and write her name in order to become a United States citizen in the 1950s.

My grandfather, on the other hand, was a more mysterious character. He was some-

thing of a rebel and more ambivalent about taking on North American ways than was my grandmother. As a young man, he left a prospering business family and subsequent inheritance in Mexico to set out on his own under a special permit to work on the transit system in Los Angeles. Yet he remained an outsider in his chosen country. Since his family claimed Mexican land and business ownership, and since he held a senior position in the family, I suspect that he had completed some part of a formal education. I know for sure that he was an avid and fluent reader of Spanish texts. Though I believe he knew more English than he let on—after all, he worked for the local transit company alongside English-speaking peers for forty years—he spoke only Spanish at home and would not answer family members, including my grandmother, if they tried to speak to him in English. I am not sure if this reluctance to speak English was motivated by cultural pride or grew from a lack of confidence in his speaking skills. However, because he came to this country literate in Spanish, he seemed to have no trouble acquiring the necessary English writing skills to fill out the paperwork for resident status, employment, and the purchase of a home, but he would only go so far. Until the end he refused to become a United States citizen, despite my grandmother's pleas.

As I recall, my first efforts at reading were in Spanish at my grandparents' home. My grandfather would return from work and, after dinner, routinely invite me to sit on his lap as he read aloud from *La Opinión*, the local Spanish-language newspaper, while my grandmother listened to Mexican folk music and local Spanish language news on the radio. I remember imagining myself reading, listening attentively to each word and carefully watching his twinkling, brown eyes, framed by skin leathered in the sun and clouded behind heavily smudged eyeglasses, move across the page. My eyes searched unrelentingly to locate the exact place where his eyes met the print that coincided with the sounds of the words

Marcia Venegas-García

coming from his mouth. Sometimes I thought I had found the exact spot that he read, but I could not be sure unless I asked and he pointed.

On those occasions I wasn't, of course, actually reading, but rather exhibiting what primary teachers describe as pre-reading behaviors. Now when I observe primary teachers working with small groups of children, I am reminded of those days on my grandfather's lap.

Beyond his reading, he explained the world to me in Spanish. He commented on reports of disasters in the macabre detail typical of Latino humor, and he sprinkled his analysis of the foolish goings on of local politicians with a tone of detached cynicism. During those formative years, he was my filter for the world outside of my family, and I did not recognize him as being different linguistically and culturally until I attended school. He had his own set of biases, less familiar to more mainstream thinkers, and they would influence me into becoming something of a rebel, like him.

Now when I hear some teachers conjecture about the dearth of texts in Latino homes, I wonder if they realize that there are many homes like my grandparents' home, whose occupants may not subscribe to *Newsweek* or purchase novels listed on the *New York Times* Best Seller List, but where Spanish-language newspapers and magazines are read and where events and ideas that affect the community as a whole are discussed vigorously and intelligently in Spanish. When I entered kindergarten, I was a fluent speaker of both Spanish and English but, sensing that I was somehow different, I had little to say in either language. I remained silent in school while chattering unceasingly at home. The school I attended had no bilingual program in any language and it was quite clear to me from the outset that my family expected me to learn to read and write English. There would be no discussion to the contrary.

But my early experiences in my grandparents home had created for me a bond with the Spanish language and culture that was not to be broken. In seventh grade I began reading, even though I had no formal schooling in Spanish, short stories and novels in Spanish that I found on the shelves of my grandparents' home. These books were written primarily for adults, often difficult to understand, and perhaps too provocative for a budding romantic, but they nevertheless lured and motivated me to read. It was not until high school that I studied Spanish in the classroom—and then with a teacher who would tolerate only formal Spanish dialects.

Bicultural Literacy

By my account, then, I would consider myself a biliterate learner living a bicultural life in those early years, that is, participating in literacy events in two languages in distinctly different cultural contexts simultaneously: English in school and with my parents, and Spanish in my grandparents' home. What I recognize now is the absence of encouragement and opportunities to develop my bicultural voice through reading or writing during all of my school years. What could have been a liberating experience, one that could have validated my pride in my bicultural identity, never happened. My school experience was typical for the time and, sadly, is still typical for many bilingual children presently in California schools. Bilingual children, especially those in low socioeconomic settings, still find few opportunities to explore ways to construct the unique stories of their bicultural or multicultural experience. This phenomenon has become more obvious to me as I have become aware of the institutional biases and the political agendas that produce legislative mandates that have little to do with the needs of diverse individuals.

It is true that I managed to function in the mainstream, middle-class "contact zone" of an all-English classroom, from kindergarten through college, but as a teacher I have seen far too many Latino students who are not surviving in school. They are dropping out as early as junior high school.

This exploration is an attempt to broaden the conversation, and to encourage readers, particularly those in power, to recognize that all of these children also have their stories of literacy. The current demand for accountability sets forth a multitude of specifics that leave little room for the special histories of English-language learners. My concerns about the cultural, social, linguistic, and literacy development hurdles that students learning English must overcome in order to survive—and about the dilemmas and frustrations of teachers who lack institutional or professional support—have compelled me to write these recollections and reflections. I hope that educational decision-makers who read this might consider a less myopic view of teaching and learning for the diverse students within our classrooms today.

Marcia Venegas-Garcia is director of the San Diego Area Writing Project.

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Struggling to Compose

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true to themselves. There is nothing "reluctant" about them. There are other times of the day to be concerned about product. Writers' workshop will be a time to be concerned about the process of composing.

There's another issue that clearly can't be avoided. If I really believe that the writer must have ownership of decisions about his or her writing, what drove me to establish a requirement for published pieces? Knowing what I know about my own writing process, I never could have met this requirement myself! I suppose it was my "easy way out." Evaluation of writing has always been impossible for me. Except for mechanics, everything else seems so arbitrary. The final product is the end of a long road. I've never been able to simply look at the "finished" piece all by itself. Maybe setting a required number of pieces helped me to avoid the real issue. Why should writing be graded at all? How is this helpful to anyone?

As you can see, I have a few answers, but many more questions. Thinking about Tom, he is much more afraid of writing than Jesus, Ronnie, or Samantha. He won't even talk about himself as a writer. It may be that he is whipping off all these pieces just to keep me happy and avoid having me ask him the questions I now know that I need to ask him. Would I call Tom a "reluctant" writer? He's reluctant to reveal himself; he's reluctant to share; he's reluctant to ask for help or admit he has needs. Maybe the real question is, why label him anything? It just gets in the way of knowing who he is. Schools shouldn't be for judging, they should be for listening, respecting, and helping.

So how do I help Tom? And how do I break it to the class that there is no required number of published pieces?

Anne Alpert was a teacher for seventeen years, first in Brooklyn, New York, and then in Norwalk, Connecticut. She currently directs the Side-by-Side Community School in Norwalk, a city school she opened in 1997 after the state of Connecticut awarded her a charter.

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Accidental Poetry

A Literacy Autobiography

Carol Case

A friend once told me that she wrote because it was "cheaper than drugs and therapy." I wrote because it kept me from killing my little sister. I waded through the melodramatic mire of adolescence, explored every closet skeleton I could find, and arrived at adulthood with my sanity, dignity, and sense of humor firmly intact.

I discovered poetry the same way most people discover it—by accident. It started with the usual "goo-goo" baby sounds and before long I was reciting performance pieces for the entire family. "Da-Da," I would announce, and my parents would drop what they were doing and listen attentively. After several stunning performances, complete with applause and requests for encore, I upgraded my repertoire to include the ABC song, which was also very well received. After several years on the performance circuit, I had become proficient in "Twinkle, Twinkle," as well as many other fine literary compositions.

When I was about four and tagging along on my mother's grocery shopping trip, she mumbled to herself "I need tuna, tomatoes, and toilet paper." I liked the sound of the words and started repeating the phrase over and over as I marched through the produce section, growing louder with every syllable. My mother frowned and told me to be quiet. Apparently nice young ladies don't go around alliterating toilet paper up and down the isles of Delchamps. I stopped saying it *out loud*, but under my breath I was chanting this phrase like a mantra. "Tuna, tomatoes, and toilet paper… tuna, tomatoes, and toilet paper … tuna, tomatoes, and toilet paper." It wasn't like my old stuff. I wasn't sure whether or not you could even call it a poem. This little ditty rhymed right up front. The beginning of the words matched instead of the ending. I was enthralled with the sound. A few years later, in first grade, a classmate taught me to say, *"Six slick slimy snails slid slowly seaward."*

I don't know how my mother survived my childhood. The more I practiced alliteration, the more she shook her head and rolled her eyes. "If you say that one more time, I'm gonna skin you alive," she would threaten. Or she would say, "I'm gonna tear you up" (whatever that meant!). Sometimes she would threaten to sell me to the gypsies or knock me into next week. Thus I learned the fine art of hyperbole in the same manner that I learned the art of alliteration—by accident.

Rhythm came next. I learned this on the playground while jumping rope. The sentences didn't just have to end with the same sound; they also had to have the same number of jumps in them. (We didn't know about syllables back then. That's an adult word, created so that they could explain what the kids on the playground already knew.) When the recess bell rang, we dashed out onto the playground and began chanting: "Cinderella, dressed in yellow/went upstairs to kiss a fellow./Made a mistake and kissed a snake./How many doctors did it take?" We jumped our way through more poems than I can remember, and started making up our own improvised poems right out there in front of God and everybody. If I were to ask my students to make up poetry on the spot, out loud, in front of the class, they would die. They would moan and groan and act as if they were being abused, but put them on the playground, give them a rope, and they'll recite poetry at the top of their lungs until the cows come home.

Accidental Poetry

By the time I was twelve, I had come to the conclusion that poetry inside the classroom was totally different from poetry outside the classroom. My uncle was a fisherman who spewed metaphors like some men spit tobacco. In middle school, I sat with one hand propped under my chin, listening to the teacher drone on about how the clouds were a metaphor for loneliness and the river was a metaphor for a long journey. Then I went fishing with my aunt, uncle, and older cousin. I listened as they described how their next-door-neighbor "drank like a fish." My cousin explained that the guy was usually "three sheets to the wind," and my uncle nodded saying that the man was indeed "high as a kite." Of course, my uncle was known to be "backwards as a yard dog." My aunt said that he was "one brick shy of a load," and had the occasional habit of "going off the deep end." She also complained that my cousin was "hell on wheels," and drove "like a bat out of hell." I never learned to fish, but I learned the meaning of the word metaphor. Of course, my mom was "madder than a wet hen" when she heard some of them, but she "cooled her jets" after a while. She exclaimed that although my uncle wasn't "wrapped too tight," he was "all wool and a yard wide," which I knew to mean that he was honest and sincere. I don't know how I knew that—I just did. Like everything else about poetry, the idea of speaking metaphorically just snuck up on me.

With the onset of puberty, poetry suddenly became desperately private. All through high school, I kept a diary hidden above the shelves in my cedar closet. It was tucked behind my pack of Virginia Slims and my forbidden halter-top. I wrote deep, angst-ridden poems, contemplating the meaning of the universe and all the wonders of nature. I wrote these poems behind my locked bedroom door with my arms huddled around my journal for fear that my little sister would find a way in and peek over my shoulder, or that my older brother would snatch the journal out of my hands and read it out loud to the neighborhood boys.

All through high school, I kept a diary hidden above the shelves in my cedar closet. It was tucked behind my pack of Virginia Slims and my forbidden halter-top.

The world revolved around me, and my poems were confirmation of that fact. I discovered the ranting beat poets of the sixties, absorbed Carl Sandburg's "Fog" imagery, and started writing my own free verse. My poetry became something more than simple wordplay. I grew less concerned with the sound of words and more concerned with the abstract concepts of love, peace, justice—concepts that did not apply to siblings, of course! I experimented with this new style, wrapping words around an image until I felt profound and mature. This stage of writing produced my absolute worst poetry, but it was a necessary part of my development. I imitated every new style, blatantly copying the form and language of each new writer I discovered. I came as close to plagiarism as you can get without being sued.

The angst and ire of teenage hormones leads us all into uncharted territory, and I used my diary as a sounding board, writing things that I would not tell a living soul. This form of self-therapy has helped a great number of people get through the rough spots of life. Who knows? I may have warded off a serious bout of insanity simply by keeping a journal. A friend once told me that she wrote because it was "cheaper than drugs and therapy." I wrote because it kept me from killing my little sister. I waded through the melodramatic mire of adolescence, explored every closet skeleton I could find, and arrived at adulthood with my sanity, dignity, and sense of humor firmly intact.

If I were a tree, you could cut me open and count the rings. If I were a book, you could flip from front to back and see all the stages I've been through in my writing journey. I sit here at the keyboard night after night, waiting to see where this poetry path will lead. I'm thankful that I have the desire to write, that I don't find it a chore, and that I have come to understand my life more for having written it down. I don't know what stage I'll go through next, and I don't know if my poetry will ever make a difference to anyone other than myself, but I do know one important thing about writing: Life is too interesting not to take notes.

Carol Case teaches middle-school language arts at Holy Family School in Mobile, Alabama, and is working on a master's degree in creative writing at the University of South Alabama. Her poems have appeared in *Astarte, Touchstone, Will Work for Peace: An Anthology of Political Poems, The Vanguard, Ordinary and Sacred as Blood: Alabama Women Speak, Louisiana Literature,* and *Gumball Poetry.* She is a teacher-consultant with the Mobile Bay Writing Project.

Reflective Friday

Time Out to Think

Kim Douillard

My students have shown me that reflection is not just for adults, not just for university students, or pre-service teachers. Even in grades one to three, they can benefit from reflective activities during the school day.

"I learned about bones," I hear Kendall announce from a cluster of students sitting on the classroom floor.

"What did you learn about bones?" I ask.

Kendall replies, "I learned that the funny bone is really called the humerus."

"Did anyone else learn something about bones?" I ask.

Rebecca answers, "I learned that the femur is the biggest bone in your body."

Julian pipes in, "And the three bones in your ear are the smallest."

On Friday mornings students enter the classroom thinking about what they have learned during the week. I call this Reflective Friday, a day set aside for reflective thinking, talking, and writing. My students have come to see reflection as a part of the curriculum. Lucy, a third grade student who recently moved to another school, sent us an email that said, "I like my new school only they don't have PE or reflection."

Reflection, as I define it in our classroom, is thinking about the ways new learning fits into what we already know. It allows us to make connections between new learning and previous experiences. Reflection helps students not only to remember but also to actively participate in the learning experience. They must interact with new information: making observations, asking questions, and comparing their understandings with those posed by others. Reflective activities in the classroom help to make thinking visible, enabling students to learn from one another and to gain greater insights into their own thinking and learning processes.

I teach in a small coastal community in San Diego County in Southern California, one with an eclectic population including migrant workers, many who work in the nearby flower fields and greenhouses, young professionals with beachfront property, and families that have lived in the community for generations. I coteach a multiage class of forty students with my teaching partner, Jan Hamilton. Students join our class in first grade and stay with us through third grade.

Before Reflective Fridays most of our reflective thinking was confined to debriefing after a field trip or class project, often squeezed into the few minutes at the end of the day or before lunch. Reflection was not high on our agenda. Yet, as an adult, I appreciate time to think about my learning, time to talk with friends and colleagues about my understanding, and time to write to clarify and record my thoughts. Without time to reflect, I forget details and take away only a broad picture that often fades with time.

I became interested in the idea of using reflective thinking as a learning tool for my young students when, thanks to an Eisenhower grant, I met with a group of elementary teachers to work toward the goal of improving our science instruction. Reflection is a process emphasized in science instruction, yet young children—those in grades one through three—are not

expected by many researchers or educational theorists to be able to reflect. Reflection, according to these experts, should begin in the fourth grade. Yet the limited experience I had with reflection led me to believe that young children were more reflective than educational theory suggested. Theories about the role of language, thought, and social interaction proposed by Vygotsky (1978), along with strategies used by Bodrova and Leong (1996), informed my thinking about how I might approach reflection with young children. Bodrova and Leong, who implemented Vygotsky's theories in their research, showed the importance of the teacher as a support for the learner and learners as support for one another. Their research suggested that young children could develop sophisticated thinking processes through collaboration with their peers and with adults.

A comment I heard at a conference propelled me to action. A teacher-researcher from Alaska talked about the volume of information that teachers are supposed to impart to students and about the lack of time in the school schedule for thinking. A typical elementary school schedule includes math, science, social studies, reading, writing, spelling, handwriting, art, music, and PE instruction, all in a six-hour school day with time out of the classroom for recess and lunch. She described her school's Reflective Friday, a day with time set aside to think. I never did get all the details, but that nudge was all I needed to take the plunge. My challenge was to develop a structure for Reflective Fridays that allowed students time to think and reflect, but also included variety and movement, quiet time and interaction.

I decided to break our day into several different kinds of reflective activities. I created a schedule for the day that began with focused reflection about classroom learning for the week and ended with time for students to have an opportunity for unstructured thinking about topics of their choice. I came up with the following schedule to guide us.

How the Day Unfolds

8:25-9:00 All-School Assembly

9:00-9:40 Brainstorming: time to reflect on the learning that has occurred in the classroom during the week as a group, generating ideas and building from the ideas of other students.

9:40-10:00 PE: time for students to let their subconscious minds reflect while their bodies are busy moving.

10:00-10:15 Recess

10:15-10:45 Reflective Writing: time for students to use writing as a tool to record and clarify their thinking about the week's learning.

10:45-11:15 Free Read: time for students to share their reflective writing with the whole group, then follow this sharing with questions and discussion about important ideas brought up in the sharing.

11:15-12:15 Portfolio Work/Goal Setting: time for students to reflect on their progress in learning, set goals for future learning, and evaluate the results.

12:15-1:00 Lunch

1:00-1:15 Thinking Time: time for students to quietly and independently think, dream, imagine, and ponder anything they want.

1:15-1:30 Dialogue Journal: time for students to carry on an individual written conversation with the teacher. This conversation does not have to be reflective, but often results in reflective thinking because of the teacher's response.

1:30-1:40 Recess

1:40-2:10 Writing Time/ Silent Reading: time for students to choose either to read or write, allowing time for additional reflection or allowing students to switch their thinking processes as they create a piece of writing or engage with a text.

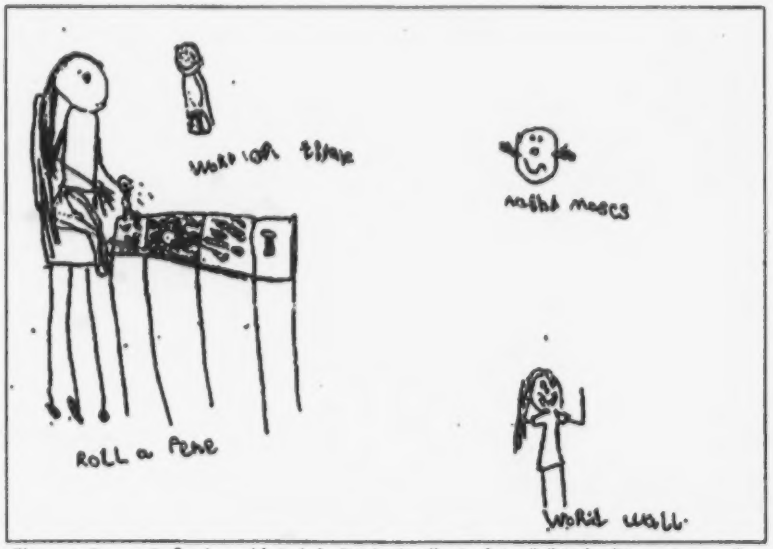

Figure 1. Drawn Reflection with Labels: "Wokr (Walker) of time"; "Naehr (Nature) mascs"; "Roll a Penne (Penny)"; "WoRd wall"

2:10-2:25 Read Aloud: time for students to listen and think as the teacher reads.

2:25-2:30 Clean-up/dismissal

In this article I focus on two of the day's activities: reflective writing and goal setting.

Nudging Students Forward

A teacher aspiring to cultivate reflectiveness in students needs patience. The results we achieved were not dramatic and sudden. Instead, subtle changes began to occur. One of our dilemmas at the beginning of the school year was how to get beginning writers to reflect in written form, since their writing skills are still emerging. After much discussion, Jan and I decided that we would ask our students to draw, rather than write, for their first reflective piece on what they had learned. We gave students each a blank piece of paper and asked them to fold it in fourths. In each space we had them draw an image that represented something they had learned during the week and then asked them to label each image. Some students included brief labels (Figure 1); others wrote full sentences to explain their thinking (Figure 2).

By folding the paper, students were able to focus on one idea at a time in each space rather than facing a full sheet of blank paper. While not all students filled each quadrant of the paper, all were successful with this first attempt at written reflection, although at this early stage their reflections consisted almost entirely of recalling all or some of the week's activities.

We continued with this procedure for several weeks. Our older students often filled their squares with writing and chose not to draw at all. Some students focused their reflection on one or two topics, while others wrote shorter pieces on a larger number of learning topics. Students soon asked for lined paper, so we gave them a choice.

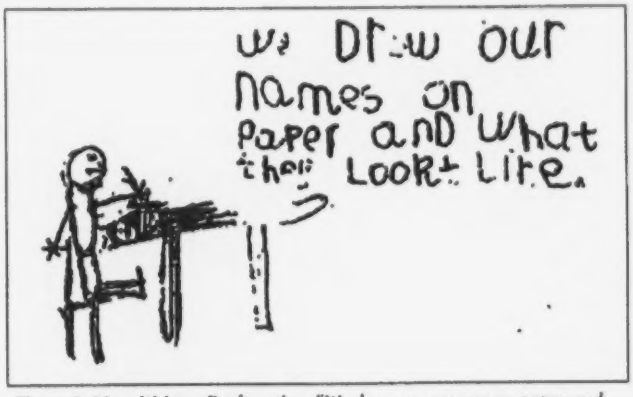

Figure 2. More Written Explanation: "We drew our names on paper and what they lookt like."

Over time, we have learned much about making this process work for us. During quiet time everyone in the classroom focuses on writing. If students get stuck, I ask questions to nudge them forward. "What did you notice?" "What are you wondering about?" "Do you have any connections?" "What does it remind you of?" I don't write prompts on the board because I don't want students to be limited.

Students continue to write until I tell them to stop. But I don't want them to quit too soon. As they begin to get restless, I remind them to "go past done," searching the farthest reaches of their minds for thoughts they haven't noticed. By the end of the school year my six- through nine-year-old students are able to sustain this reflective writing for thirty to forty minutes and often groan when I ask them to finish their last thought.

Types of Thinking and How They Change

Students' reflective writing changes over the course of the school year. What begins as simple labels or a telling of what was done, a type of thinking that I call recounting, develops into more complex thinking. By analyzing students' written reflections and discussion, I have identified several types of thinking that develop.

Recounting: "I learned about the field trip plants."

Observation: "Ben's grandma looked fancy."

Questions: "How many astronauts have landed on the moon? If few, how come we know so much about it?"

Connections: "When we did circle fractions I thought it was pretty easy. But when we did the fractions with the rectangle we had to think about what we already knew about fractions and put it to the rectangle form."

Evaluation: "We had a debate over one fifth of 20 is four or five. I thought it was four because four goes into 20 five times. Joanna thought it was five because it was one fifth. What a sad answer!"

Self-Awareness: "I think the patterns helped me count by threes and nines, so now whenever I need to know my threes or nines I can just look at the piece of paper."

New Information: "When we went to Mission Trails I learned that poison oak likes to grow under oak trees."

Details: "When we did Ocean in a Bucket we added a lot of salt and also gummy worms and we also added rocks, shells, gummy sharks and also dry ice."

A comparison of types of thinking used in October (Figure 3) and May (Figure 4) shows recounting as the most common initial type of thinking used in reflection. First and second grade students began to use more types of thinking as their experience with reflection increased. Third grade students began the year with more types of thinking represented in their reflections and used less recounting, probably because they had more sophisticated writing skills and experience with reflection than the younger students in our class.

Over time, all students' reflections included more types of thinking, although the various types of thinking did not seem to develop in any particular pattern. The inclusion of two types of thinking in a reflection changed the reflection dramatically. Students moved from a simple statement in their reflection, to a more thoughtful description of their thinking. As they included more types of thinking, their reflections became more complex and connected.

By May, none of the second and third grade students relied on a single type of thinking to express their thoughts through the written reflection. While developing different types of thinking is not, by itself, the goal of reflective thinking, it is clear that students show greater understanding as they are able to move past telling what happened toward drawing conclusions, connecting their learning to their own experiences, making observations, and evaluating their own learning.

Haiku Reflection

Julie, a third grade student, uses several types of thinking in her reflection about haiku.

At first, when we did the Haiku poetry, I thought I couldn't do it. It sounded so hard! Doing all of the syllables so it went 5-7-5!? Then I just did it! I thought of a sentence that macked [matched] what I wanted to write about, and checked it. If it worked, I'd write it down. If there was a few syllables too less or too many, I'd see if I could cut down on the contrations or delete a useless word like and. I think writing Haiku poetry is a good way to learn what syllables are, and how to use them. If you don't know your syllables, then you can't write Haiku because there has to be a cirtain amount of syllables in each line!

Julie shows self-awareness as she explores her initial difficulty with haiku. She continues with an explanation of her newly learned strategy and evaluates the usefulness of haiku in teaching syllabication. Through her reflection, Julie shows her analysis and complex understanding of haiku.

A Tale of Two Students

Reflection does not develop evenly for all students, though many students follow a similar pattern. Brian came into first grade already reading and spelling at a high level. He was reluctant to write, even though he didn't struggle to spell the words he chose. Many early readers are critical of their writing ability, not wanting to risk writing words incorrectly. Brian's October reflection

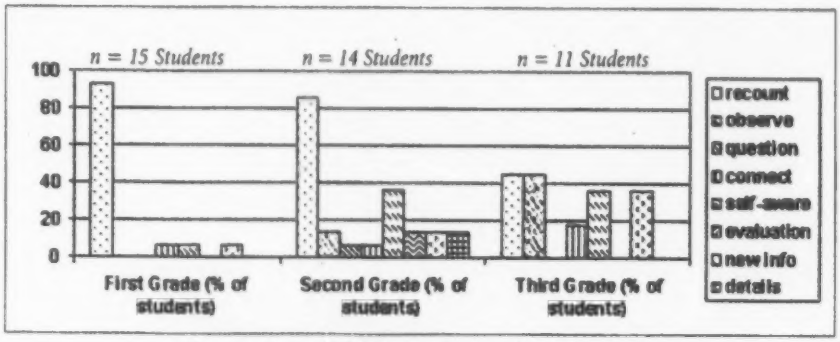

Figure 3: Types of Thinking in October of All Three Grades

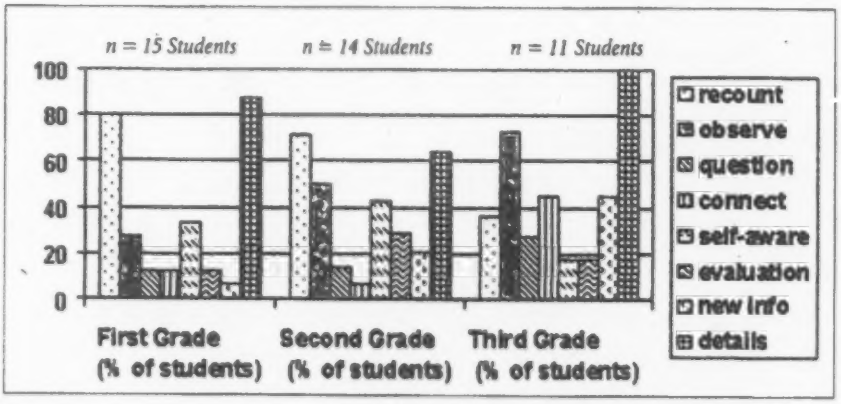

Figure 4: Types of Thinking in May of All Three Grades

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does not include any drawings, unlike the reflections of most first graders. He wrote two sentences, both complete and spelled correctly, briefly naming topics covered during the week: "I learned about the field trip plants. I learned about non fiction writing."

As the school year progressed, he continued to write complete sentences with most of the words spelled correctly. His written reflections do not become more complex over time. Even in May, his reflection includes just two complete sentences retelling events that happened during the week: "In library we watched a movie about sholastic's Book Fair. We did finger-painting with our kid righting."

Figure 5: Maria's October Reflection

Maria came into first grade at the same reading and writing level as most first-graders in our district. She knew how to read and write some sight words but was not confident.

Maria's October reflection (Figure 5) is typical of most first grade students.

She drew pictures of her learning—including a PE activity, jumping jacks, and Kumeyaay plants—and then labeled them. She also drew a picture of a computer to represent time spent in the computer lab and a picture of the word wall in the classroom (with the words on the wall spelled correctly), and wrote, "I Lrd hoo To Sal [I learned how to spell]."

As the school year continued, Maria's written reflections became more complex, and she moved from drawing and labeling to writing her thoughts without pictures. Like most of our students by the end of the school year, Maria was able to express her learning without prompts or questions from others. Figure 6 shows Maria's May reflection about Grandparent's Day and a reading activity. Here is the text of her reflection with her phonetic spelling corrected:

Grandparent's Day

It was grandparent's day. My grandma couldn't come because she is sick and so is my grandpa. That is why they couldn't come. But other people's grandparents came. We sang songs for them and after every song they clapped for us. It was fun singing songs for them. Ben's grandma looked fancy. Grandpas came too. That was really fun. Lizzy's grandma and grandpa came and listened to her sing. It was really, really fun!...

We read a story called Puddles. In Puddles they used words like ka boom!! And words like slap slap slap and hop flap pop and it was all about kid stuff like jumping in puddles and getting dirty and stomping in mud and touching worms. And there is similes and metaphors...

Maria's reflection shows the complexity of her thinking. She recounts the activity (they sang songs), makes evaluative observations (Ben's grandma looked fancy), focuses on specifics (Lizzy's grandma and grandpa came and listened to her sing), personalizes the event (her grandma couldn't come because she was sick), and draws a conclusion (it was really, really fun). In the second paragraph she cites language from the story that affected her (words like *ka boom*), connects the details of the story to her experience (kid stuff like jumping in puddles), and demonstrates her command

of some new vocabulary (similes and metaphors).

While Brian's reflective skills did not appear to improve during his first grade year, as he began second grade, his reflections became more complex. By October of his second grade year, Brian evaluated learning situations, pointed out new learning, and included more detail in his reflections.

> *In library we wached a movie about Christopher Colubbus. It was a good movie. I learned that you could sail west to go east. In circles and stars for home work journals. On the first game I got 200 something. On the second game I got 300, something. On the third game I got 300 something again. I got a total of at least 900!!!!!!!!!*

Brian and Maria remind me that students develop different skills at varying rates, that the student who is the most skilled at reading is not necessarily equally skilled at thinking reflectively. Brian's development points out the need for patience and trust in the belief that students will become more reflective over time.

Setting Goals and Evaluating Progress

The young students I teach have shown me their ability to be reflective and how that reflectiveness benefits their learning. As students reflect and become more aware of their own learning, they are able to set goals and evaluate their progress.

Edward, a first grader who speaks Spanish as his first language, began the school year with a limited knowledge of the alphabet and the sounds that letters make. Like the other students, he began his reflection with pictures, including more writing as he was able. In March he reflected on what he had learned—how to add and subtract, how to add big and small numbers, how to do calendar—and set goals for himself, to learn to tell time and to practice at school and at home. His reflection (Figure 7) helped him describe his learning at his student-led conference with his parents.

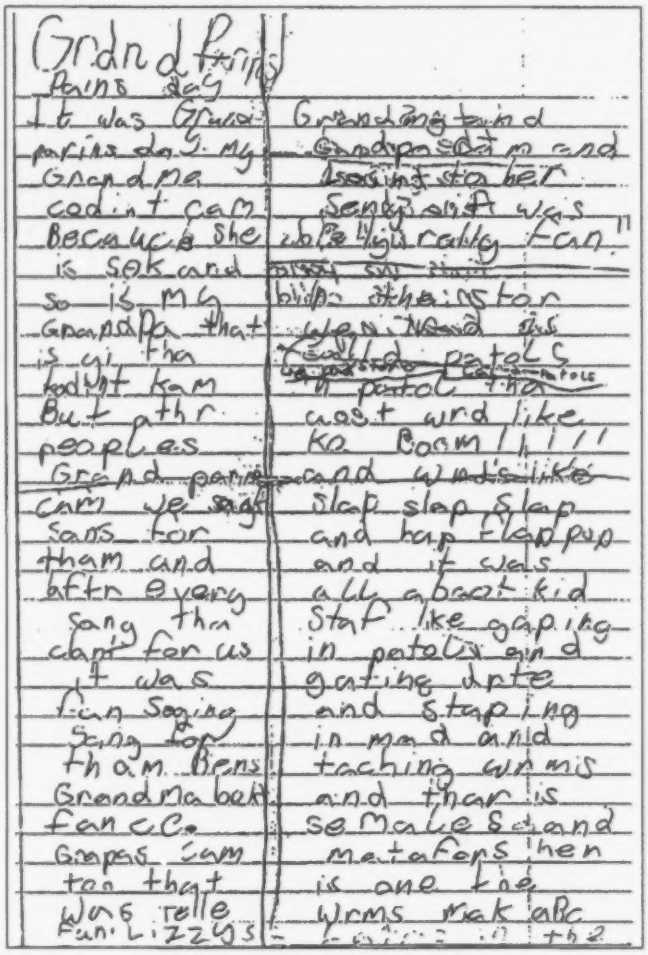

Figure 6: Maria's May Reflection

Besides setting goals, students who reflect also become more aware of their own learning. In the following reflection, Zach, a third-grader, evaluates his progress as a writer during his third grade year. He is aware of what he has learned as a writer, of the areas where he is still progressing, and of his growing awareness of his own reflective abilities.

Me as a Writer

Over the summer I didn't write very much or at all! So when I came back to school it was a shock! The first couple of months I was just tring to get the feel for it again. Then I wrote my first poem that I really liked. Just Me: The one that I read at the poetry reading. After that I liked almost every poem I wrote. I don't only write poems, I write reflections too. But they have always been my tough spot. Actually they have been getting easier for me. I wonder why? I am writing a reflection right now. Look at how much I have written already! Still, I could definitely improve by not just scratching the surface but getting deeper as Mrs. Douillard would say. In writing I probably write poems the best. If I have a subject. Otherwise I just sit there staring into space looking for a topic.

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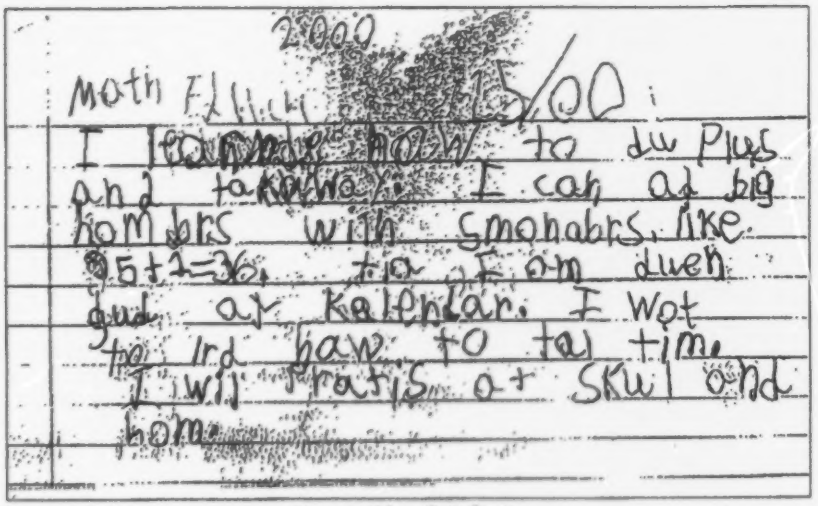
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I will practis at skul and
home.

Figure 7: Edward's Reflection

> *All the tools that I developed during the year (like 6-room poetry) I use to help me find a subject.*

Students who set goals and evaluate their progress have more ownership of their learning. Through realistic, short-term goal setting and evaluation, students recognize their successes, become aware that they are responsible for their own progress, and are more motivated to work toward the goals they set.

Going Past Done

My students have pushed me to "go past done" when it comes to thinking about their learning. Rather than depending solely on educational research or learning theories to tell me what they are able and not able to do, I turn to them for answers. They have shown me that in a multiage class such as ours, they can benefit from reflective activities during the school day. They have shown me that reflection is not just for adults, not just for university students, or pre-service teachers. Reflection helps us to remember, to make connections, and to make thoughtful, informed decisions. Reflection is a process for living.

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Kim Douillard is a codirector of the San Diego Area Writing Project. An active teacher-researcher for the past four years, she generated this article from research conducted in her multiage classroom at Cardiff Elementary School. Recently she attended the NWP Professional Writing Retreat in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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Letters

Where Teachers Fall

My wife, an English teacher, is subscribed to your magazine, having now completed two summers of training in the writing project program.

I am a former English teacher myself and am still quite interested in, particularly, the teaching of composition, still including serious writing projects in my computer classes. I discovered the research and instruction of the Bay Area Writing Project in the late '70s and found the precepts very useful in my career as a writing instructor.

However, I need to tell you how useless I find articles such as Kevin Lavey's "Student Slayer: The Imposed Curriculum" [Summer 2000 issue]. Its whining negativity and self-righteous overstatement are precisely the things that made the *English Journal* in the '80s such a waste.

The most obvious defect in the article is that his approach masks the real problem: Mr. Lavey and his colleagues who will not take responsibility for their failures. Yes. His failures. Obviously if his students were not passing a skills-based test (and upper-level thinking skills *are* skills), he and his colleagues were not building it into their curriculum. I'm presuming that he's been there a while, being a consultant and all. If the problem was that, for all those years of failure, students were coming out of the feeding elementary schools, why didn't he and his colleagues go over to those schools, or call a meeting with the teachers there, and set up some curricular expectations?

But, no, if my guessing is correct, Mr. Lavey's approach had to do with bellyaching in the teacher's lounge and well-chosen snidities at workshops.

Frankly, if, as he admits, his previous curricular efforts did his students no good—or the wrong good as evidenced by the test scores he cites—he deserved to lose control of his curriculum.

You have a fine publication working towards worthy ends. I've found quite a bit of useful thinking going on in your pages. Thank you for hearing me out.

Stan Raines
Brownsville, Texas

Kevin Lavey responds:

Mr. Raines and I appear to be philosophically opposed on matters of education. If I'm reading his response correctly, he feels that schools and teachers have an obligation to impose a set of skills and standards onto kids using a prescribed curriculum, while I feel that schools should cultivate a process of discovery that begins with students and the community.

I've seen kids come into middle school year after year with tremendous energy and intelligence that we, as a school, do not celebrate and encourage. Almost half of the kids who enter Baltimore City high schools don't graduate. We have to examine why that is. Mr. Raines points to failures of teachers as the source of the students' abysmal performance. I contend that the problem is broader than that. I think it's the responsibility of the community, which includes policymakers, school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and everyone else with a vested interest in education to figure out what makes for a meaningful education.

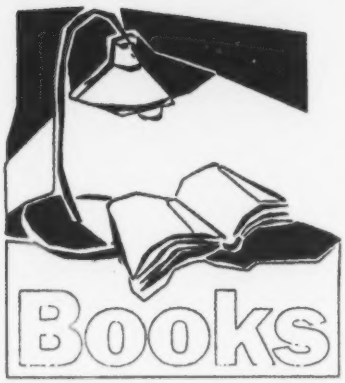
Students' inability to succeed in school is not a matter of teachers not doing their jobs. The pressure from above to raise test scores through an imposed curriculum is a powerful means of stealing authority from teachers and students alike. It diminishes creativity and inspires conformity. We teachers can work hard to engage our students within the parameters set down for us, but when a pedagogy rigidly values statistics above students, we should challenge it.

My debate with Mr. Raines recalls John Dewey. Those who would promote learning by doing and those who support top-down instruction have long been at odds. I don't have the answers to the problems of education all worked out by any means. But in thinking about my own traditional Catholic education, I recognize that what went on in school was part of a collective value system that had its wellsprings in my folks' religion and their community. The standards that were valued came out of an agreement, a contract so to speak, between the school and the community.

It seems to me that we have lost a vital link between the relevancy of the kids' lives and what happens in schools. I'd like to see that relationship cultivated. I want to see our kids excel in school, and I think they can do that when they find meaning there.

What do you think?

We'd like to know your thoughts about the articles you read in *The Quarterly.* Address your letter to Quarterly Editors, National Writing Project, University of California, 615 University Hall, Berkeley, CA 94710-1040, or send email to *editors@writingproject.org* with "Letter to the Editor" as your subject line. We'd love to hear from you.



Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups
by Candace Spigelman
Reviewed by Jane Mikoni

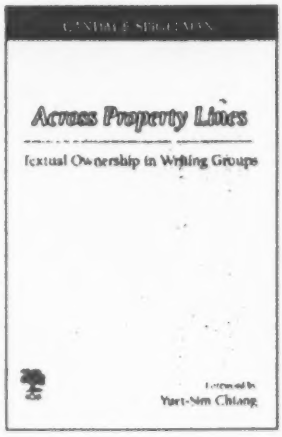
Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing
by Peter Elbow
Reviewed by Tom Thompson

Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers
by Tom Romano
Reviewed by Stephen Smarjesse

Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups

Candace Spigelman. Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.
176 pp. $14.95. ISBN 0-8093-2294-3.

I was a writer long before I was a teacher. For many years, I worked as a legislative reporter in a crowded newsroom with forty-three other journalists. Although we covered the same press conferences, hearings, and legislative sessions, we competed with each other for the best quotes from the best sources and tried to write different angles of the same story. Success was measured by the placement of one's byline in the newspaper. Front page got lots of attention and increased the chance of being noticed by editors of larger, metropolitan papers. I quickly learned that my survival as well as my success would depend on getting my byline on the front page as often as possible, and that depended on the quality of my work. So I developed an ability to seize my stories, to declare ownership of my work. That approach worked, and I was promoted and moved on to better jobs.



There was never time to reflect on the way in which competition kicked me from the level of novice reporter to that of mature journalist until I became a writing teacher. I remember one evening, as I read over a student's work, feeling unsatisfied, left with a desire to know more about the person behind the written page. The words were empty; there was nothing to suggest that they represented a thinking, feeling person. By the time I finished searching for evidence of real students in the stack of papers, I knew I had to help my students seize ownership of their written work.

Writers' groups became my favorite practice for liberating what I termed *silenced writers*, because the groups decentralized authority in the classroom and provided student writers with an immediate audience and a forum where their work could be affirmed as a product of their own ideas. Most of the time these groups worked well, but there were times when even the most productive groups did little more than edit papers. I knew something was lacking, but did not know what that something was until I read the first chapter of Candace Spigelman's *Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups.*

Spigelman notes that in "both academic and nonacademic settings most writers embrace the notion of textual ownership and . . . it continues to factor decisively in writing group operations in both contexts" (15). She claims that the writers who benefit most from group work are those who "recognize themselves as the central authority" over their texts, because they are able to temporarily yield control to group members and allow them to actively engage in their work (68). I had not considered the impact of the writing group on writers who were still in the process of developing authorial control, but this book prompted me to think more carefully about my students' perceptions of textual ownership and how it shaped the work they were doing in peer groups.

Based on her study of two writing groups, one in an academic setting, the other a private informal group, Spigelman addresses differences between public and private writing as a prelude to her analysis of attitudes about the concepts of textual ownership and their effects on writing group performance. At the heart of the

problem is a tension inherent in writing groups that requires students to "relinquish their texts, to create as well as to find meanings, to understand knowledge as socially constructed by groups as well as privately held by individuals, and to use their peers' work as unattributed sources" (22).

This explanation of the social constructivist nature of group work prompted me to consider the potential for confusing students who were in the process of staking out a sense of ownership of their work. How did they feel about work that was produced in a group where peers functioned as "coauthors" (68)? Did they feel a sense of authority over a text they had revised by incorporating changes suggested by peers? Had I inadvertently confounded the notion of ownership when I encouraged my students to appropriate others' ideas in their revisions? The last thing teachers want to do is to confuse students with mixed messages about knowledge making, but that's exactly what we are doing when we fail to consider the varied and complex notions of ownership and the ways in which the tasks of group work conflict with those ideas.

Aside from the inhibiting effect of group work on students' writing processes, Spigelman adds that student writers must also contend with social and institutional pressures created by the academic setting, which manifests in "varied interpretations of academic conventions regarding the ethics and methods of appropriating source material" (71). But, what are teachers to do? In most cases, we cannot change the realities of the setting for student writing groups. Nor can we remove the evaluative mandate of instruction.

Spigelman recommends that we begin by coming to terms with the power teachers have in writing classrooms, where "student writers must take into account the presence of the teacher, who as silent member, calls meetings, sets the agenda and monitors productivity." We must also consider that student writers, unlike writers who belong to private groups, always face "issues of evaluation and, in many settings, real or imagined competition for grades" (110).

I had to admit that competition, which had nurtured my own writing, could be inhibiting my students' ability to develop textual ownership in their written works. I wondered if competition, when combined with the pressures inherent in the setting, contributed to the silencing of my students? I had to admit that my lack of understanding of students' perceptions of ownership probably had shaped the quality of group work. One thing was clear; I had many more questions than answers about my approach to teaching writing.

While Spigelman's book doesn't offer the kind of practical solutions many of us have come to expect, it is an important work which prompts writing teachers to reflect on the complications that arise from unexamined pedagogy, particularly as it relates to contradictory notions about ownership in writing groups. Her book is not for the faint of heart, and I wouldn't recommend reading it unless you are prepared to allow her claims to provoke questions about your own classroom practices.

Rather than finding answers to my questions, I found that Spigelman's careful treatment of the issues helped me gain a better understanding of the reasons my students have struggled to establish authority in their written works. With that understanding, I think I'm going to be a little more patient with my developing writers and allow them the space to take control of their work, word by word.

Jane Mikoni is director of the Capital Area Writing Project at Penn State Harrisburg, where she also teaches humanities and writing. She has been a reporter for the Associated Press and ABC Radio, PBS news anchor for WITF in Harrisburg, and press secretary for the auditor general of Pennsylvania.

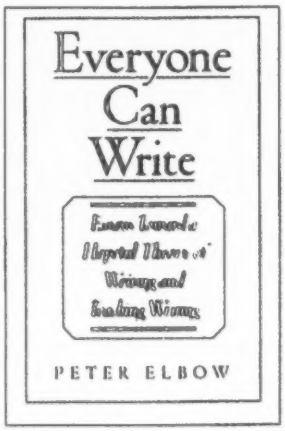
Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing

Peter Elbow. Oxford University Press, 2000. 475 pp. $45.00 hardcover; $18.95 paperback. ISBN 0-1951-0416-1.

When I first saw that Peter Elbow had a new volume of essays, I was excited. Even when I disagree with what he says, I can always count on him to challenge my thinking about what is possible in the classroom. A cursory glance at the table of contents, however, disappointed me. Rather than a collection of new essays, this volume seemed to be little more than Peter Elbow's Greatest Hits. Further, as I read the first "new" essay, I realized that it wasn't "new" at all, but was simply a published version of a lecture I had heard Elbow deliver eight years ago.

As I worked my way through the essay, however, I realized that I wasn't reading "old" material, but rather was enjoying the fruit of Elbow's particular writing process—a process that can let a piece "cook" and "grow" for several years before it reaches publication. Besides, many readers probably missed most of these essays when they were first published, either because the essays appeared in less-prominent forums or because they were published ten or even

twenty years ago. Even those readers familiar with the essays will discover that many have been revised, with some pieces merely excerpted as "fragments" to complement other pieces in the collection. Finally, Elbow has grouped the pieces topically to offer a reasonably coherent presentation of his theory of teaching writing—a theory which merits careful consideration by anyone who teaches writing.



For that reason alone, this volume belongs in the library of everyone who teaches or studies composition theory. Previous efforts to infer Elbow's theory, usually based on only a few articles, come mostly from opponents of "romantic" or "expressivist" approaches. Even though I have trouble with Elbow's claim that more writing—with no intervention and no audience other than the writer—leads "inevitably" to better writing, I'd rather get the argument from Elbow himself than from someone hostile to the concept.

Elbow's theory is, as the title states, "hopeful." Although he acknowledges that "good writing takes hard work and skill," he bases his approach to teaching writing on what he terms some "hopeful truths":

> It is possible for anyone to produce a lot of writing with pleasure and satisfaction and without too much struggle.
>
> It is possible for anyone to figure out what he or she really means and wants to say and finally get it clear on paper.
>
> It is possible for anyone to write things that others will want to read.
>
> When people manage to say what they really mean and to get themselves into their writing, readers tend to have the experience of making contact with the writer—an experience that most people seek (xiv).

These premises might seem more "utopian" than "hopeful," but Elbow embraces utopian models, arguing that we need such models to help us see through deceptions served up by common sense. For example, he notes that, although observation tells us the sun revolves around the earth, we now accept as "true" a model that tells us the exact opposite. If we accept such "truths" to help us understand the physical world, it seems only reasonable to consider equally utopian (or hopeful) "truths" to help us understand how writers write.

The first writer Elbow attempts to understand is himself. In "Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard," he recounts his struggles to write in college—he dropped out of Harvard before his inability to write caused him to flunk out—and attempts to make sense of his experience. The next chapter, "A Map of Writing in Terms of Audience and Response," turns practical, offering twelve different sites for writing, or twelve different kinds of writing teachers can assign. The third chapter, "The Uses of Binary Thinking," is highly theoretical, arguing that thinking in opposites can help us better understand any object or idea under consideration, and that "contrary claims can both be right or valid" (73). These chapters, along with a fragment excerpted from the 1998 edition of *Writing Without Teachers*, comprise the first section, "Premises and Foundations." The remaining sections—"The Generative Dimension," "Speech, Writing, and Voice," "Discourses," "Teaching," and "Evaluation and Grading"—are equally diverse in style and focus. Despite their diversity, however (or perhaps because of it), these pieces provide a reasonable explanation of Elbow's perspective on the enterprise of teaching writing.

Everyone Can Write is not a systematic explication of a coherent theory of writing. Elbow himself admits that a "skeptical reader might say that this book is just a collection of unrelated essays . . . and not be wrong" (xiii). In fact, Peter Elbow's Greatest Hits might be an appropriate title. Still, this collection of "hits," drawn from three decades of musings and reflections, demands the attention of anyone seriously interested in teaching writing.

Having taught at two high schools and a community college, Tom Thompson completed a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition at Florida State University, and is currently an associate professor of English at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, where he directs the Lowcountry Writing Project.

Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers

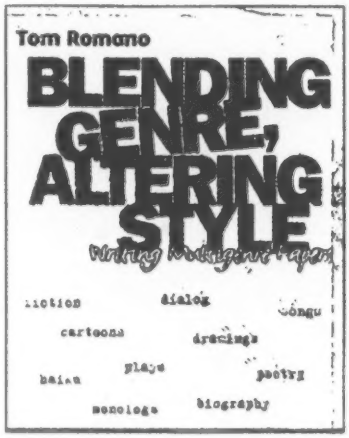
Tom Romano. Boynton/Cook, 2000. 208 pp. $18.50.
ISBN 0-8670-9478-8.

For me, part of good teaching includes creating new assignments to fit the students' interests and changes in society. When the year changed from 1999 to 2000, my assignments seemed antiquated, and I was even more inspired to find unique ideas for teaching writing.

Books

Tom Romano's newest book, *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers,* introduced me to a creative research approach. A colleague recommended this book as an extension of the I-Search format established by Ken Macrorie, which emphasizes primary sources rather than secondary information and frees the researcher to write about discoveries using first person pronouns. Romano's approach offers even more creative opportunities.

Multigenre papers are layered with poetry, letters, scripts, song lyrics, narratives, and news articles created in response to information found through research. The basis for Romano's approach is to "[r]esist explaining, summing up, and analyzing. Create scenes instead. Become like the novelist or filmmaker" (72). Personal topics, such as family history, take a new appearance and tone when the writer creates a letter that an ancestor did not have time to write. In a traditional report on a typical research topic such as anorexia, the writer funnels information from primary or secondary sources into a standard form. When the writer uses the same source information to write a multigenre paper, however, the facts might become the basis of a realistic diary for a fictional victim of the disease, and the finished product might also include photographs, original drawings, or photocopied art.



The multigenre paper thus engages students in a higher level of creative thought. At the same time, it helps them develop and hone their basic skills. Rather than summarizing the information in a report, they use the facts to create multiple "[g]enres of narrative thinking," which Romano tells us "require writers to be concrete and precise. They can't just tell in abstract language. They can't just be paradigmatic. They must show. They must make their topics palpable" (26).

The multigenre paper is a new concept for most readers, and those who expect a traditional research paper will quickly lose their way. Romano discovered through classroom experience that students must orient readers by writing an introduction that clearly explains the process used in developing the paper and that also contextualizes the topic. He suggests that the first genre to follow the introduction be carefully chosen, because its powerful position will set the tone for the entire product.

He invites teachers interested in having students plunge into multigenre papers to use his examples, written by students ranging from elementary to college age, until students can provide their own models. Teachers interested in finding out more about multigenre papers will find references, lists of works cited, and helpful resources, including step-by-step instructions, exercises, and classroom strategies for specific parts of the process. Teachers not yet ready to take the plunge might make use of the chapters devoted to a specific genre, such as "The Many Ways of Poems," which offers a new look at haiku and introduces newer forms such as poems for two voices.

Sandy Nesvig, Minnesota Writing Project fellow and middle-school language arts teacher whom Romano quotes in the book, has been using the multigenre approach since she heard the author speak about it several years ago. In her experience, "the approach works well for all students because of the independence it allows. It especially works well for the artistic student who often includes poetry and visual products like collages." She agrees with Romano's observations that there are two ways of learning—emotional and intellectual. Nesvig believes that the multigenre approach promotes a very different way of knowing. "It is a close way of learning, and it allows kids to become emotionally involved."

At the heart of this research approach lies an important academic discussion about the value of narrative product rather than expository writing. Romano proposes that "[i]n multigenre papers writers can combine fact with imagination to invent scenes that illustrate truth, or . . . to render scenes that actually happened but whose details have been lost. Imagination, after all, is a powerful way of knowing" (68).

I find Romano's multigenre approach to research inspiring. After twenty-nine years in a traditional school setting, I found the appeal of teaching in an alternative school irresistible, and Romano has given me an important tool for teaching in a new environment.

Stephen Smarjesse is a high school language arts teacher at the Osseo Area Learning Center in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. He serves on the policy board for the Minnesota Writing Project.

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Call for Manuscripts

We welcome lively, well-written articles on the writing process and the teaching of writing, as well as engaging reports by writing teachers on the research they conduct in their classrooms. Articles can take the form of personal experience or opinion, or can explore the work of others who have contributed to the field.

We are especially interested in articles by teachers or researchers that address the following themes:

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- Exploring connections between writing and reading
- Grounding student writing in community
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If you have an idea for an article addressing one of these themes, or an idea for an article of general interest to writing teachers and researchers, give us a call at 510-642-0976, or send a query letter, draft, or completed manuscript to: *The Quarterly,* National Writing Project, Graduate School of Education, 615 University Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720. Please send a self-addressed, stamped envelope for complete writer's guidelines.

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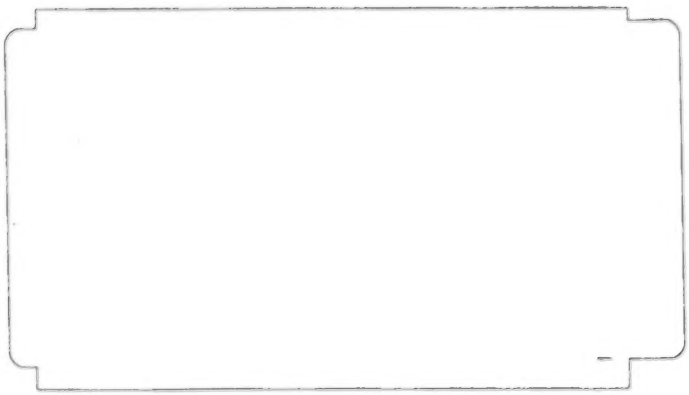

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